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Work-related psychological health among Catholic religious in Italy:

Testing the balanced affect model

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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 religious leaders 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). A sample of 156 religious leaders (95 men and 61 women) serving with the Roman Catholic Church in Italy completed SEEM and SIMS together with an independent measure of wellbeing. The results confirm the hypothesis that high SIMS scores reduced the negative effects of high SEEM scores on the independent measure of wellbeing.

*Keywords:* Balanced affect, purpose in life, religious leaders, exhaustion, satisfaction

## **Introduction**

The work-related psychological health of those engaged in religious and pastoral leadership is a field of concern for practical theologians and for occupational psychologists, and consequently a proper activity for empirical theologians committed to draw on theories and methods of the social science to test and to illuminate theological areas of enquiry. However, when theologians draw on the insights of occupational psychology, it is necessary to test the assumptions of the models being utilised and the value of these models for promoting a healthier and more effective Christian ministry. Drawing on data from a specific sample of Catholic religious in Italy, the argument of the present study is that the two different approaches to conceptualising and assessing poor work-related psychological health, or burnout, among religious leaders that have been employed in recent published research carry different implications for promoting a healthier and more effective Christian ministry.

The model of burnout proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1996) and assessed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been employed in studies reported by Evers and Tomic (2003), Golden, Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, and Rodgers (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). Another set of studies has employed a modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory especially shaped to reflect the experiences of religious leaders by Rutledge and Francis (2004). This modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been employed in studies reported by Francis and Rutledge (2000), Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004), Francis and Turton (2004a, 2004b),

Randall (2004, 2007), Rutledge (2006), Turton and Francis (2007), and Francis, Turton, and Loudon (2007).

The model of burnout proposed by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) and assessed by the Francis Burnout Inventory has been employed among religious leaders in studies 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).

The differences between the two models of burnout proposed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Francis Burnout Inventory are not only matters of conceptual and scientific interest. The differences between the two models carry implications for understanding the psychological dynamics of burnout among those engaged in religious ministries and the religious life and for proposing intervention of a remedial or preventative nature. Maslach conceptualises and measures burnout in terms of three component constructs which are described as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and low personal accomplishment. According to Maslach's conceptualisation the relationship among these three components is sequential. According to this model emotional exhaustion is the lead and primary indicator of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1996). Emotional exhaustion then leads to depersonalisation, and depersonalisation leads to the loss of the sense of accomplishment. The strength of this model is that it generates theories regarding the progressive development of the symptoms of burnout. The weakness is that the model does not offer clear insights into remedial or preventative strategies. It may not be easy to remove the causes of emotional burnout with which religious leaders are routinely faced day-by-day, especially in a social context in which

the work loads of religious leaders increase while the human resources are decreasing in view of falling vocations and eroding income.

Francis conceptualises and measures burnout in terms of two component constructs which are described as emotional exhaustion and satisfaction in ministry. According to Francis' conceptualisation the relationship between these two components is described as one of balanced affect. The two components are not related sequentially but are viewed as contemporaneous and orthogonal. The notion of balanced affect has its roots in the classic theories of Bradburn (1969). According to Bradburn's theories positive affect and negative affect are not opposite poles of a single continuum but independent psychological phenomena. In this sense it is reasonable and possible for an individual to record both high levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect. Within the Francis Burnout Inventory, positive affect is operationalised in terms of the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and negative affect is operationalised in terms of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. In this sense it is reasonable and possible for individual religious leaders to record both high levels of satisfaction in ministry and high levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry. According to Bradburn's theories high levels of positive affect are able to offset high levels of negative affect. The strength of the model is that it generates theories about how the problems of poor work-related psychological health or burnout among religious leaders may be addressed in terms of remedial and preventative strategies. Even when it may not be possible to reduce the causes of emotional exhaustion in ministry, it may be possible to explore ways of compensating for high levels of emotional exhaustion by maximising strategies for enhancing the sense of satisfaction in ministry.

In adjudicating between the theoretical and practical strengths of the two models of burnout proposed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Francis Burnout Inventory it becomes important to test whether or not the application of Bradburn's (1969) classic model

of balanced affect really applies to the experiences of religious leaders. Put another way, it is important to test the validity of the model operationalised by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) through the two measures of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale.

The first study to test the validity of the balance affect model of burnout among religious leaders was reported by Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011) among clergy serving in the Presbyterian Church (USA). 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.

In a second study, Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) argued that there were two weaknesses in the study reported by Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011) that could be addressed by replications and extensions of that 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 second weakness concerns the reliance on only one group of religious

leaders, located both geographically and denominationally (Presbyterian ministers in the USA). Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) addressed these two weaknesses by designing and reporting on a study among 155 priests serving within the Roman Catholic Church in Italy and by proposing the Purpose in Life Scale (Robbins & Francis, 2000) as the independent measure of psychological health, with low scores suggesting the situation of burnout. 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 negative affect.

In a third study, Francis, Village, Bruce, and Woolever (2015) proposed a way for testing the validity of the balanced affect model for clergy work-related psychological health independently of the two specific measures of positive and negative affect proposed by Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, and Castle (2005) in the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. Drawing on data provided by 622 clergy who completed the Leaders' Survey within the US Congregational Life Survey, Francis, Village, Bruce, and Woolever (2015) developed a new six-item measure of negative affect (Emotional Exhaustion in Ministerial Life Index) and a new six-item measure of positive affect (Satisfaction in Ministerial Life Index). They also developed a new three-item measure as an indicator of burnout (Likelihood of Leaving Ministry Index). Crucially for supporting the construct validity of the notion of balanced affect, the data demonstrated a significant interaction effect between the Emotional Exhaustion in Ministerial Life Index and the Satisfaction in Ministerial Life Index on the independent measure of burnout the Likelihood of Leaving Ministry Index, again showing that the mitigating effects of positive affect on burnout increased with increasing levels of negative affect.

### **Replication studies**



Replication studies which independently demonstrate reproducibility in those sciences which rely on human behaviour have sometimes been considered at best an unnecessary luxury and at worst a distraction from the primary scientific pursuit of generating new knowledge. But this validation practice is common in the physical sciences, which include physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy and materials science. The philosopher of science Karl Popper noted briefly in his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that ‘non-reproducible single occurrences are of no significance to science’ (Popper, 1934, p. 66). The statistician Ronald Fisher wrote in his book *The Design of Experiments*, which set the foundations for the modern scientific practice of hypothesis testing and statistical significance, that ‘we may say that a phenomenon is experimentally demonstrable when we know how to conduct an experiment which will rarely fail to give us statistically significant results’ (Fisher, 1935, p. 14). Such assertions express a common dogma, rarely discussed in modern physical sciences, that reproducibility is a necessary condition (although not necessarily sufficient) for establishing a scientific fact, and in practice for establishing scientific authority in any field of knowledge.

Reproducibility via replication can also remove much existential theorising concerning abstract concepts such as the psychological scales used in this paper. As Heidegger (1933) stated ‘It is not the source of knowledge but its verification that determines its objectivity in science’ (p. 272). The physicist does not pause at length to ask: Do these events which I observe exist only in my perception? He asks: Do they lead to communicable judgments based on repeated and verified experience?

There is an increasing call for replication studies that validate, as well as those that invalidate previous research in Psychology and Psychometrics, as there has similarly been in Econometrics, another science which relies heavily on human behaviour. The much publicised Replication Project within the broad field of psychology (see Fradera, 2015) has

cast serious doubt on this dismissive approach to the scientific discipline of replication within psychology. Against this background of the Replication Project, the present study takes the view that there is real value in building on the three studies reported by Francis, Village, Robbins, and Wulff (2011), Francis, Village, Bruce, and Woolever (2015), and Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press), by replicating their basic research design and by extending it among a differently conceived population. Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) had already extended the first study in the series by employing Italian translations of the measures from that first time among Catholic priests. By very definition their study was restricted to male participants. The original contribution of the present extension of that research is that it continues to employ the Italian translation of the research instruments among a mixed population of Catholic priests (male) and Catholic religious sisters (female).

### **Research question**

Taking a measure of purpose in life as an independent index of wellbeing the present study tests the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between satisfaction in ministry and purpose in life; that there is a negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and purpose in life; and that the interaction term between emotional exhaustion and satisfaction in ministry would account for additional variance within purpose in life scores, indicating that the mitigating effect of satisfaction in ministry on purpose in life increases with increasing levels of negative affect.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In the context of programmes operated in Rome for Catholic priests and religious sisters (who were broadly engaged in religious ministry within the community) 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 156 participants (61 women and 95 men).

### **Participants**

The mean age of the 61 religious sisters was 50.6 years ( $SD = 13.5$ ), with a range between 24 and 74. The mean age of the 95 priests was 55.8 years ( $SD = 15.0$ ) with a range between 27 and 86. Of the total participants 33 were non-graduates and 123 were graduates, among whom 20 held doctoral level qualifications.

### **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**

- 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 .85 and the first factor accounting for 41% of the variance. In terms of indicators of emotional exhaustion, some idea of the extent of the problem among priests and religious sisters is given by paying attention to the three items attracting the highest levels of endorsement. Around one in five of the priests and religious sisters considered that they felt drained by fulfilling their ministry roles (19%), that they have been discouraged by the lack of personal support for their ministry where they are serving (22%), and that fatigue and irritation are part of their daily experience (23%).

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 .88 and the first factor accounting for 48% of the variance. In terms of indicators of satisfaction in ministry, some idea of the level of reward experienced by priests and religious sisters is given by paying attention to the five items attracting the highest levels of endorsement. Nine out of every ten of the priests and religious sisters felt that their teaching ministry had a positive influence on people's faith (91%) and that their pastoral ministry had a positive influence on people's lives (90%). Eight out of every ten of the priests and religious sisters said that ministry gave real purpose and meaning to their lives (83%), that they were really glad that they had entered the ministry (82%), and that they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their current ministry (80%).

- insert table 2 about here -

The second step in data analysis examines the mean scale scores on the three core variables employed in the analysis and the correlations between them. Table 2 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 3 about here -

The third 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 after taking the effect of sex into account. 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 3. 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.

- 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), Francis, Village, Bruce, and Woolever (2015), and Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) designed to test the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health and burnout among religious leaders, 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), Francis, Village, Bruce, and Woolever (2015), and Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) provided support for the balanced affect model by demonstrating the significance of the interaction term between emotional exhaustion and satisfaction in ministry against an independent measure of burnout.

The present study replicated and extended this earlier work by employing for the second time the Italian translation of the Francis Burnout Inventory, but among a different population. While the first study conducted in Italy and reported by Francis, Laycock, and Crea (in press) concentrated only on priests (men) the present study extended that work in an original way by concentrating on a mixed sample of men (priests) and women (religious sisters) who were broadly engaged in religious ministry within the community. That the data from this second study also unequivocally supports the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health among religious leaders provides further support for the theory and further construct validation for the Francis Burnout Inventory as an operationalised form of that theory.

Implications follow from these empirical findings for the ways in which practical theologians and pastoral theologians may conceptualise and understand poor work-related psychological health and professional burnout among those engaged in religious and pastoral leadership. The differentiation between positive affect and negative affect allows these distinctive psychological phenomena to be considered independently. While religious leaders need properly to be warned against the experiences and situations that generate negative affect,

it is also reasonable and realistic to anticipate that many of these factors cannot be effectively removed from the pastoral experience. The pastoral vocation anticipates being engaged with others in emotionally exhausting contexts. On the other hand, the experiences and the situations that generate positive affect may be more within the control of individual religious leaders. It is also within the capacity of continuing vocational development programmes to enable individual religious leaders to become more consciously aware of those experiences and situations that resource positive affect for them. In this way the balanced affect model of good work-related psychological health offers practical theologians and pastoral theologians insights into effective strategies that may enhance the work-related psychological health of religious leaders and reduce their vulnerability to professional burnout.

On the basis of the findings from the two studies conducted in the USA and the two studies conducted in Italy (one among Catholic priests and the other among priests and religious sisters), the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health among religious leaders and the Francis Burnout Inventory can be commended for further studies exploring the incidence and correlates of burnout among religious leaders. 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 denominated 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	.40	.48	19
Fatigue and irritation are part of my daily experience	.53	.62	23
I am invaded by sadness I can't explain	.66	.75	12
I am feeling negative or cynical about the people with whom I work	.57	.69	9
I always have enthusiasm for my work*	.43	.52	65
My humour has a cynical and biting tone	.64	.74	14
I find myself spending less and less time with those among whom I minister	.54	.65	10
I have been discouraged by the lack of personal support for me here	.50	.60	22
I find myself frustrated in my attempts to accomplish tasks important to me	.67	.74	12
I am less patient with those among whom I minister than I used to be	.44	.55	17
I am becoming less flexible in my dealings with those among whom I minister	.54	.65	6
Alpha / % variance	.85	41%	
<i>Satisfaction in Ministry Scale</i>			
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in my current ministry	.61	.69	80
I gain a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people in my current ministry	.68	.76	79
I deal very effectively with the problems of the people in my current ministry	.34	.40	72
I can easily understand how those among whom I minister feel about things	.33	.39	79
I feel very positive about my current ministry	.73	.81	76
I feel that my pastoral ministry has a positive influence on people's lives	.60	.69	90
I feel that my teaching ministry has a positive influence on people's faith	.50	.58	91
I feel that my ministry is really appreciated by people	.54	.62	71
I am really glad that I entered the ministry	.69	.78	82
The ministry here gives real purpose and meaning to my life	.77	.84	83
I gain a lot of personal satisfaction from fulfilling my ministry roles	.78	.85	77
Alpha / % variance	.88	48%	

Note: N = 156

\* 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

*Mean scale scores and correlation matrix*

	Alpha	Mean	SD	SIMS	SEEM
Purpose in Life Scale (PILS)	.92	53.08	6.60	.69	-.59
Emotional Exhaustion	.85	22.72	6.72	-.57	
Satisfaction in Ministry	.88	43.97	6.18		

(N = 156)



Table 3

*Multiple regression of PILS on SEEM and interaction with SIMS*

	B	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
Constant	63.4619	1.9476	32.6	.001
SEX	-1.7244	.7275	-2.4	.020
SEEM	-1.2504	.0964	-13.0	.001
SEEM * SIMS	.0213	.0026	8.1	.001

(N = 156)

Figure 1

