Burnout among teachers: theoretical setting, top-down innovation, and social relations
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§ 4 THE EQUITY SENSITIVITY THEORY

4.1 The equity theory

The equity theory was presented by Adams (1963, 1965). This theory attempts to explain the behavior and feelings in a variety of relationships. According to Adams, individuals in social exchange relationships appear to gauge their relationships in a two-step process. In the first step they compare their inputs to the received outcomes. In the second step they compare their perceived input/outcome ratio to the perceived input/outcome ratio of comparable others.

Inputs are all efforts of an individual that he considers to be contributions on his part to the relationship (study, certificates, working hours, and exertion). Outcomes are divided in tangible (pay) and intangible (friendship, respect) outcomes. The intangible outcomes are more symbolic and more often intrinsic, meaning that they come from the relationship itself. It is important to realize that the urge someone experiences to compare his input/outcome ratio with someone else becomes stronger the more he considers himself to be equal to that other individual (Syrout & Von Grumkow, 1977). Moreover, the inputs and outcomes concerned must be recognized and considered as relevant to the exchange (Patrick & Jackson, 1991).

Resulting from the two-step process, the equity theory departs from the following basic principles. First, individuals seek equitable relationships. Second, individuals experience distress when they perceive themselves engaged in inequitable relationships. Third, individuals attempt to restore equity in inequitable relationships in order to minimize the feelings of distress. There are various ways how the individual can restore equity in a relationship. Individuals may change their perceptions of inputs or outcomes, actually change their own inputs or outcomes, and finally leave the relationship (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1985; Patrick & Jackson, 1991). The equity theory gained support and was even labeled in Weick's study (1966), as cited in Miles, Hatfield, and Huseman (1994), as belonging to the category of the most useful middle-range theories of organizational behavior. The predicted distress in inequitable organizational relationships was supposed to be related to job (dis)satisfaction. However, research results showed inconsistent findings concerning the predicted levels of distress among workers in similar relationships of underpayment or overpayment (Patrick & Jackson, 1991). These findings instigated researchers to suggest that perceptions of inequity were influenced by individual and situational differences (Carrell &
Dittrich, 1978; Homans, 1961; Mowday, 1987). The suggested, and initially universally accepted, cultural norm governing equity was found to be inaccurate and had to be adjusted in order to account for the influence of individual perceptions to inequity (Miles, Hatfield, & Huseman, 1989). The conclusion was that individuals vary in their sensitivity to equity.

4.2 Equity sensitivity

The equity sensitivity construct is defined as a personality variable suggesting that the individual reacts in a consistent way to perceived equity or inequity (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). This definition offers a theoretical framework for understanding individual differences in regard to reactions to equity that could not be explained before. Huseman et al. (1985) found that individuals could be classified as Benevolents ("givers"), Equity Sensitives, and Entitleds ("getters"). Miles (1988) suggested that especially the concern for maintaining a good relationship with the comparable other person and the desire for outcomes differed from one equity sensitivity group to the other.

In the first instance, the definition of equity sensitivity posed that individuals had different preferences for equity. In a later study (King, Miles, & Day, 1993) the idea that benevolent individuals show a "preference" for under-reward was found to be doubtful, and was replaced by the more fitting terminology of "tolerance" for input or outcomes. The original idea that benevolents have a preference for under-reward was not confirmed. The sources of the tolerance can be found in Calvinistic heritage, altruism, empathy, or disguised self-interest (King et al., 1993). However, in matters of satisfaction no differences were found between the two categories in over-reward conditions. On the other hand, benevolents reported higher levels of satisfaction than entitleds did in over-reward conditions. This finding suggests that benevolents have a relative tolerance for under-reward and over-reward, but not a preference for under-reward (King et al., 1993).

As indicated by the definition, individuals participating in inequitable exchange relations experience distress. The universal norm for equity as originally suggested in Adam's work (1965) has been replaced by norms that are related to individual demographic (age, sex) and personality variables (Huseman, et al., 1987). An important implication for the examination of the origin of teacher burnout is the fact that the teacher's place on the equity sensitivity continuum should be established. It would be conducive to taking preventive measures in the alleviation of inequity in their relationship with the school, thus helping avoid the onset of feelings of distress (Brouwers, 2000).
The equity sensitivity measure, the Equity Sensitivity Instrument (ESI) was developed and validated by King and Miles (1994). The instrument was tested on its psychometric properties again by Sauley and Bedeian (2000). They developed a new 16-item questionnaire, the Equity Preference Questionnaire (EPQ). The authors claim that "...the instrument compared favorably with published personality inventories" (p.901). It seems to be worth while to use this new instrument in future studies on the subject.

In contrast to self-efficacy, equity sensitivity is believed to be stable among one and the same individual. This finding may result in some confusion in scientific debate. Sometimes we do indeed find indications of change in an individual's equity sensitivity. This is the case when someone's input/outcome ratio is compared at different ages in his life, or at different periods in his professional career (Huseman, et al., 1987). These changes, however, could be attributed to a developmental process in human life, the probably unconsciously applied individual norm of equity, the individual's equity sensitivity, will not have changed.

Studies about equity sensitivity are often focused on relationships in organizations (Kickul & Lester, 2001; Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999). However, equity sensitivity is also studied in close relationships (Sprecher, 1986). As for the educational domain studies on equity sensitivity and teacher burnout appeared (Van Horn & Schaufeli, 1996; Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999; Taris et al., 2000; Taris, Peeters, Le Blanc, Schreurs, & Schaufeli, 2001). Taris et al. (2001), for instance, found that perceived inequity has not only an indirect effect on burnout through elevated levels of distress but also directly increases the levels of burnout among the teachers. Another interesting result was presented by Van Horn et al. (1999) stating that the impact of lack of reciprocity (mutual exchange) in the relationship with students and burnout among the teachers was not supported. On the other hand, feelings of inequity in the relationship with the organization did increase the level of burnout among these teachers. As the depersonalization scale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory mainly deals with the relationship of the teacher and the students (clients), we believe that measuring feelings of inequity among teachers will help more clearly reveal their mental situation, which we attempted to show in our study on the moderating effects of equity sensitivity (Chapter 10). O'Neill and Mone (1998) also studied equity sensitivity as a moderator of the relations between self-efficacy and workplace attitudes. But their study was conducted among health care workers, whereas teachers participated in our study. The results of the latter study underlined the moderating role of equity sensitivity between self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which variable is known for its significant relationship with burnout.

In conclusion we assert that measuring teachers' well-being with the help of
instruments based on various theories will lead to more reliable results, and therefore better opportunities will be obtained to take preventive measures in fighting burnout.