Burnout and job engagement in dentistry

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General introduction and background

This thesis covers research concerning a diversity of aspects about burnout among dentists. In addition, positive working experience (i.e., job engagement and job resources) was investigated. The research described can to some extent be considered a continuation of the research by Gorter (2000). Gorter performed a series of studies on the incidence and level of burnout among dentists in The Netherlands and evaluated a prevention program that was specifically aimed at dentists-general practitioner\(^1\). Movir Insurance, that financially supported this initial research, agreed to support an additional research project, aimed at possible ways of burnout prevention and intervention in this professional group. In doing so the focus was placed on more specific details of the research (i.e., structure of the burnout measure, specific effects of gender on burnout), as well as on the long-term effects of the aforementioned prevention program. Furthermore, the burnout research was extended with a number of aspects that are considered important for possible intervention and prevention of work stress and burnout.

**Current burnout research and new perspectives**

In a recent publication, Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker (2002a) describe several recent trends in burnout research that are indicative of its increasing popularity in scientific research. One of these trends is that burnout is now investigated around the globe, whereas at first the focus of study lay largely in North America. Within burnout research, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996) is the most widely used questionnaire to measure burnout, although alternatives are available (Enzmann, Schaufeli, Janssen & Rozeman, 1998). To

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\(^1\) Conducted by Van Ede development, Zeist, The Netherlands.
illustrate its popularity, it has been demonstrated that about 9 out of every 10 publications on burnout utilize the MBI (Enzmann et al., 1998).

A second indication of the popularity of burnout is the expansion of the concept from the human services to all types of professions and occupational groups (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Although this has led to the development of different versions of the MBI, all versions adhere to a three-dimensional definition of burnout (Gorter, Albrecht, Hoogstraten & Eijkman, 1999a; Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000; Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo & Schaufeli, 2000). In their conceptualization, Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) regard burnout to be a three-dimensional construct, characterized by feelings of being overextended (emotional exhaustion – EE); by negative, cynical attitudes (depersonalisation – D); and by reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (personal accomplishment – PA).

In addition to its persistent popularity, and the broadening of the research area, a relatively new development in burnout research is a renewed focus on its conceptual opposite: job engagement. Traditionally, attention within research was focused on the negative aspects of the working experience (i.e., work stress and burnout). Increasingly, however, a less pessimistic and more constructive stance is taken. According to this view, it is to be expected that a healthy working situation not only develops because of the absence of negative factors, but that it can also be reinforced by promoting the more positive characteristics. Research by Gorter (2000) already indicated that, generally speaking, dentists are able to find ways of coping with the numerous pitfalls within the profession. To explore these issues further, in this thesis new studies are described that incorporate both positive and negative aspects of the dental working environment.

Aims and structure of this thesis

Chapters 2-8 cover a diversity of topics, ranging from the replication of earlier research to the development and assessment of new instruments and concepts. The chapters are based on papers that were previously published in, or are currently submitted to, international scientific journals. As a result, each chapter can be read independent of topics covered in other chapters, as it contains a comprehensive
account of the proceedings necessary to address its specific aims. Thus, a certain amount of overlap between chapters was unavoidable, especially concerning the description of the research population and materials used.

The thesis is organized around three aims. As a first aim, the occurrence and development of burnout among Dutch dentists-general practitioner is examined. To this end, chapter 2 describes a replication study on the usability of a Dutch burnout questionnaire. Also, this chapter compares the results found among Dutch dentists to results found in comparable occupations. Additionally, attention is given to the sequence in which the three burnout components (EE, D, and PA) develop over time. Chapter 3 further extends on the topic of the sequence of burnout components by replicating the results reported in chapter 2 in a longitudinal setting. Such longitudinal research on the development of burnout, unique in burnout research among dentists, can lead to important insights in the causal development of burnout.

A second aim of this thesis is to take a closer look at burnout prevention and intervention. A ‘generic’ effect of gender on the development of work stress and burnout is often implied in burnout literature (e.g., the manual for the Dutch version of the MBI (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000) applies separate norms for men and women on the D scale). In chapter 4 such gender differences among Dutch dentists are further examined. Chapter 5 describes a study that analyzes the long-term effects of the aforementioned burnout-intervention program for dentists. Partly in consequence of the results reported in chapter 5, efforts were made to develop a new instrument for intervention. These efforts resulted in a practical and easily accessible Internet-based instrument that provides the dentist with feedback on work stress and burnout. In chapter 6 the development of this instrument – called the ‘Stress Thermometer’ – is described, and its applicability for the dental practitioner is determined.

A third aim of this thesis is to explore new ways to improve the working experience of dentists, by expanding the current research on burnout and work stress among Dutch dentists to its conceptual positive opposites: job engagement and job resources. In chapter 7 the relation between engagement and burnout among dentists
is analyzed. Chapter 8 further explores the positive aspects of the dental work, by investigating which aspects are considered to be stimulating among dentists.

In chapter 9 the findings of the various topics covered in the preceding chapters are summarized and reviewed. Furthermore, chapter 9 provides in a more general discussion on several topics covered in this thesis. Hopefully, this thesis will help to improve the working conditions of the dentist-general practitioner, not only by identifying early signs of burnout, but also in supplying an increased insight in the many benefits that are present in performing dental care.