

Stress and Burnout in the European Workplace and the Role of Resilience

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Abstract:

Objective: This thesis examines the link between stress, burnout and resilience in the European workplace.

Design: review article

Methods: Using a large number of studies and data sets from various European countries, the effects of stress in the workplace on individual health and performance as well as on a societal level are analyzed.

Results: It becomes clear that stress and burnout are not just individual problems, but are also influenced by national economic, cultural and political factors. The results show that the risk of burnout can be influenced by a variety of different factors, which must be taken into account when developing countermeasures. In addition, cultural differences in coping with stress and the role of resilience as a protective factor against burnout are examined

Conclusion: The paper concludes that fostering resilience and supportive environments is crucial for mitigating workplace stress and preventing burnout.

Introduction

Throughout Europe, people are exposed to high levels of stress at their workplace. Stress research is a wide-ranging, global field of research with a long tradition, which, in relation to burnout, focuses on the long-term strain on various areas of work (such as work pressure) and at the same time on physical and mental health.

An unmanageable, high level of stress is considered to be one of the main causes of burnout. The World Health Organization (WHO) has re-categorized burnout in its current diagnostic manual ICD-11 Burnout and relates the diagnosis of burnout exclusively to the workplace, as a result of stress that cannot be managed [1]. Burnout then manifests itself in symptoms such as emotional detachment, low performance and physical problems, all of which can be traced back to the effects of long-term stressors in the workplace [2].

In these circumstances, the concept of resilience is central to successfully coping with stress. Resilience is understood as an individual's ability to cope with adversity. It is present when someone is able to cope unexpectedly well with an extremely threatening, stressful or high-risk situation and can adapt and develop from the challenges. It is primarily aimed at mental health [2]. Resilience is therefore a crucial skill that can be used to develop the right tools and attitudes to master the challenges of modern workplaces and lead a healthy and balanced life. It is now more important than ever for burnout prevention. This article will first outline different levels of stress in the workplace in different European countries. Burnout and its causes and symptoms will then be described and the interdependencies between stress, burnout and resilience will be elaborated on.

Theoretical Framework

Worldwide, stress levels are at a record high [3], with the effects being particularly evident in the workplace. Various studies have shown that stress levels are not only dependent on individual factors, but are also influenced by

national economic, cultural and governmental indicators.

A comprehensive study by Schaufeli (2018) [4] examines the relationship between burnout at a European country level and a variety of national economic, governmental and cultural indicators. Data on burnout was used from the 6th European Working Conditions Survey (2015), which included random samples of workers from thirty-five European countries. This data was supplemented by various economic, governmental and cultural aspects from other sources, such as the World Bank, Eurostat and the United Nations. The results show that countries with the highest burnout levels are mainly found in Eastern Europe (Poland) and South-Eastern Europe (Albania, Turkey and the countries of the former Yugoslavia; Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia). Countries with the lowest burnout levels are located in north-western Europe (such as the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland).

Furthermore, it is found that higher levels of burnout are observed in countries with poorer economic performance in relation to gross domestic product (GDP). This relationship is non-linear, meaning that in countries with the worst economic performance, even a relatively small increase in GDP is associated with a relatively large decrease in burnout, while in the best performing countries, a further increase in GDP only marginally reduces burnout levels [4].

The study also shows that burnout levels are higher

- in countries where work is valued as more important and higher;
- in countries with weak democracy, corruption, gender inequality and low integrity;
- in less individualistic, hierarchical countries where people feel uncomfortable with uncertainty.

These findings mirror the results of other studies that have examined the relationship between work engagement, happiness and employee wellbeing [5].

The latest Lepaya study [6], in which 1,322

European employees were surveyed, confirms that European employees are highly stressed. The study shows that 66% of respondents reported experiencing distress (negative stress) at work [6]. This stress can be attributed to high work pressure, long working hours, organizational changes and job insecurity. The differentiation of stress levels in various European countries also shows that German employees are at the top of the list with a stress level of 71%, closely followed by British employees with 70% [6]. Different sectors are the most stressed. Lepaya lists the financial sector, the automotive industry, manufacturing, healthcare and education in particular. Despite the growing awareness of the problem - on both the employee and employer side - opinions differ as to who should take the initiative to tackle stress caused by the workplace. Some employees look to employers for the solution, but there is often a big disconnect here, particularly due to expectations among those employees who feel that their companies are not providing them with enough support to cope with stress. In fact, the ideas and expectations of employees and the help they demand cannot always be realistically implemented [6].

For their part, employers in Europe are trying to promote the well-being of their employees through flexible working hours, creating an environment that facilitates work-life balance [7].

Methodology

This study employs a systematic review methodology to examine the prevalence of stress and burnout in the European workplace and to explore the interplay between stress, burnout, and resilience. The literature search was conducted using the online academic database PubMed. Keywords including “stress,” “burnout,” “workplace,” “Europe,” and “resilience” were used to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, research reports, and grey literature. Inclusion criteria involved selecting studies published between 2010 and 2023, written in English or German, focusing on European workplaces, and providing data on stress, burnout, or resilience. Exclusion criteria included studies outside the scope of European workplaces or those lacking relevance to the topic.

Data extraction involved systematically reviewing and synthesizing information from se-

lected studies, including sample characteristics, measurement tools used, key findings, and conclusions. Quantitative data, such as prevalence rates of stress and burnout, were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data, such as thematic analyses of resilience factors, were synthesized thematically. The synthesis of findings aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of stress, burnout, and resilience in the European workplace, identify key trends and patterns, and highlight gaps in the existing literature. This methodological approach allows for a rigorous and systematic review of the available evidence, informing discussions and recommendations for future research and practice.

Results

In summary, we have come a long way in studying resilience, stress and burnout in the European workplace. The evidence gathered from the various studies suggests that organizational and cultural differences in coping approaches and support networks are important in combating stress and burnout.

Observation 1: Regional Disparities in Burnout Levels

Our findings reveal significant regional disparities in burnout levels across European countries. Countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe exhibit higher levels of burnout compared to those in north-western Europe. This observation underscores the importance of considering regional variations in workplace stressors and the need for tailored interventions to address burnout in different contexts.

Observation 2: Economic and Sociopolitical Factors Influence Burnout

Furthermore, our research highlights the influence of economic and sociopolitical factors on burnout levels. Countries with poorer economic performance and weaker governance structures tend to experience higher rates of burnout. This suggests that broader societal factors play a crucial role in shaping workplace stress and underscores the need for comprehensive approaches that address both individual and systemic factors contributing to burnout.

Observation 3: Sectoral Differences in Stress Levels

Our study also emphasizes sectoral differences in stress levels, with certain industries such as finance, automotive, manufacturing, healthcare, and education experiencing higher levels of stress compared to others. This finding underscores the importance of targeted interventions tailored to specific industries, as well as the need for sector-wide initiatives to promote employee well-being and resilience.

Observation 4: Role of Organizational Support and Resilience

Moreover, the results of our study highlight the critical role of organizational support and individual resilience in mitigating the impact of workplace stress and burnout. Employees who perceive adequate support from their organizations and possess higher levels of resilience are better equipped to cope with stressors and maintain well-being. This underscores the importance of fostering a supportive work environment and investing in resilience-building initiatives to promote employee health and productivity.

Discussion

Burnout as a result of stress: causes and symptoms

Burnout is the result of prolonged stress in the workplace, which manifests itself in physical and psychological symptoms that can drastically reduce a person's overall performance. Physical signs of burnout include diarrhea, high blood pressure, decreased immune function, migraines and sleep disorders [8]. On the psychological side, one may experience difficulty concentrating, depressed mood, feelings of worthlessness, loss of interest or pleasure in activities and even suicidal thoughts. Distinguishing burnout from other mental illnesses such as depression is essential, as burnout is essentially a result of chronic work stress. Factors that lead to burnout include unlimited time pressure, lack of cooperation with management, unspecified role expectations, unbearable workload and unfair treatment in the workplace [8]. If ignored, the condition leads to burnout, disconnection from work-related activities, exhaustion and fading

performance. However, burnout is treatable and employees can take preventative measures by asking their managers for support, considering a less stressful job, using personal self-techniques such as meditation and exercise, and seeking professional help when needed.

Burnout has become one of the most widespread problems in the European business environment, with a large percentage of workers showing signs of chronic stress and exhaustion [9]. Studies show that there are varying rates of burnout in several European countries and companies, but many workers complain of burnout due to work overload and emotional burnout. Causes of burnout in most workplaces in the EU include high workload, lack of supportive management, unclear role expectations and unfair treatment. The increasing normalization of chronic stress in the workplace and the more open discussion of mental health issues are increasing the level of burnout [10]. Mitigating burnout requires a holistic approach and involves creating supportive measures in the workplace, promoting work-life balance and providing resources for mental health care.

The high prevalence of burnout syndrome in European countries is considered a public health problem, and the countries concerned have taken different approaches to the issue. Although only nine of the 23 responding countries consider burnout syndrome to be an occupational risk, its economic and social cost is considerable. For example, burnout was found to be responsible for around 15% of sickness absence in the Netherlands, costing around €1.7 billion in 2005 [11]. This results in a significant financial burden of absenteeism and reduced productivity due to burnout, which the healthcare sector and employers have to bear. The understanding of burnout is growing with the development of new methods of data storage for suspected cases. As a result, there is a widespread understanding of the need for preventative measures and support systems that minimize the impact of burnout on individuals and society.

Resilience as a protective factor against burnout

According to Li (2023, p. 14) [12], resilience can be understood as a burnout prevention factor, i.e. a significant protective mechanism that

prevents the destructive consequences of stress at work and burnout. It comprises several elements that make it possible to adapt to stressful situations, cope with mental stress and prevent it from having an impact on one's mental state. The most important elements of psychological capital generally include adaptability, problem-solving skills, social support systems, self-efficacy and a sense of purpose or goal orientation. Resilience helps to overcome a setback, maintain a positive attitude and continue to perform at your best despite various stressors in the workplace. Resilience should be a focus for companies in skills development as it helps employees to cope better in stressful work environments and prevent burnout. Research on healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that resilience is the key factor that helps to manage stress and avoid burnout in highly stressful and challenging situations. These results lead to the finding that higher resilience in healthcare workers correlates with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and higher levels of personal accomplishment. This finding highlights the importance of personal resources such as resilience as a mechanism for coping with the workload caused by the pandemic [13]. Resilience can be seen as a critical asset for organizations and individuals. Therefore, skills that promote resilience should be prioritized to help combat burnout and maintain our health.

Improving individual resilience in European workplaces will be crucial in the future to minimize the risk of burnout and increase the well-being of employees. Strategies to increase resilience are possible at both an individual and organizational level. At an individual level, stress management programs and mindfulness training, as well as providing opportunities to improve resilience, can help employees to better manage stress and cope with workplace challenges [9]. In addition to fostering a culture of openness and communication in the workplace, employees can seek help, which is important for developing social bonds that are essential for resilience. Organizational strategies may include departmental arrangements that provide flexibility, promotion of work-life balance, and employee assistance programs that cover practical support and resources as part of the needs [14]. European workplaces can create a caring and

encouraging environment that helps employees survive and adapt to difficult times by focusing on resilience-building activities for individuals and organizations.

Cultural influences on resilience and coping mechanisms

Luong et al. (2020) [15] investigated the role of cultural differences in the formation of coping strategies and their effects on affective reactions and memories. They compared the coping strategies of Chinese Americans (CA) and European Americans (EA) when interpersonal conflict becomes a problem. CAs, who often come from more collectivist cultures, favor strategies that help maintain social harmony and peaceful co-existence, whereas EAs, who mainly come from more individualistic cultures, tend to use more confrontational strategies. CAs showed a lower response to the immediate positive affect elicited by the tasks. However, the stronger recovery of positive affect compared to EAs was due to higher ratings of emotional support and lower endorsement of opinion defense. Nevertheless, one week later, the EAs indicated that they had experienced much more positive affect and much less negative affect from the tasks, an inaccuracy for which the authors blamed their greater tendency to defend their opinions. The results of the present study emphasize that cultural differences in coping strategies shape affective experiences for the different time periods, indicating the sensitive interactions between culture, coping strategies and the resulting emotions.

Cultural values of national importance greatly influence workforce resilience. Cultures may differ in their emphasis on factors such as individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and long-term versus short-term orientation, which can play a crucial role in how individuals behave in adverse situations and how they bounce back after challenges [16]. It can be seen that collectivism is emphasized in many Asian countries. Therefore, individuals in these cultures may seek support from their social networks and develop strategies to hold together as a core resilience. As in many Western countries, resilience in cultures that are considered highly individualistic is developed through independence, assertiveness, personal growth and autonomy. By exploring and leverag-

ing such culturally determined traditions, developing tailored programs can thus help improve resilience. Establishing organizational policies that resonate with employees and allow them to thrive in different cultures can be creatively designed and tailored to each employee [17].

The study of European expatriate executives in New Zealand and cross-cultural training (CCT) can provide insight into the critical role of cultural awareness in corporate training programs. The findings highlight that multinational corporations (MNCs) in Europe should increase organizational support for expatriate CCT programs to equip employees for MNC roles [18]. The research highlights the inadequacy of the host country culture in providing CCT for expatriates. This calls for a gap in the consideration of cultural adaptation in CCT. Multinational companies operating in Europe therefore need to adopt a well-rounded and adaptable CCT that takes a unique approach that leverages the understanding and capabilities of the host country culture [18]. By closing the existing gap and providing expatriates with the tools and knowledge they need to overcome cultural differences, MNCs can better support their employees to adapt and perform in international cultural environments.

Policy implications and recommendations

Recommending sustainable solutions to stress and burnout in Europe requires a two-dimensional approach that is identical to government and employer policies. Governments can play a key role by enacting regulations that lead to work-life balance and limit working hours. Companies, for their part, should create a conducive work environment, offer wellbeing programs, organize resilience training and encourage openness in stress management [19]. More importantly, resilience should be integrated into curricula and professional development programs to enable individuals to take ownership of their level of competence in overcoming challenges at work. European employment policies should be supported with robust campaigns for a holistic approach to health that includes the interrelation or interdependence between physical, mental and emotional health in building a productive and sustainable workplace [19]. By integrating these suggestions into their develop-

ment concepts, European organizations can create an environment that promotes resilience and well-being to prevent stress and burnout among their employees [20].

Conclusion

Burnout in the workplace significantly impacts employees' quality of life, leading to severe physical and psychological symptoms that diminish overall performance and well-being. Our research has identified critical risk factors, including high workload, lack of supportive management, unclear role expectations, and economic and sociopolitical influences. These factors contribute to elevated stress levels and higher rates of burnout, particularly in certain regions and sectors. Resilience emerged as a vital protective factor, enabling individuals to cope better with workplace stress and maintain their mental health. Employees with higher resilience levels and adequate organizational support are more likely to navigate stress effectively, thereby preventing burnout. To improve the situation, we recommend integrating resilience training into academic curricula and professional development programs. Additionally, organizations should create supportive work environments, promote work-life balance, and offer resources for mental health care. By adopting these strategies, workplaces can enhance employee well-being, reduce burnout, and foster a healthier, more productive workforce.

Moving forward, it is clear that resilience training should be included in academic programs and professional development seminars to equip individuals with the necessary skills to navigate the challenges of the modern workplace. Future research should focus on investigating the effectiveness of these interventions and looking for further ways to strengthen resilience in the rapidly changing work context. Despite the complexity of the European work environment, workforce resilience is critical as a common denominator for improving workers' physical and mental well-being and productivity.

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