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From person-environment misfit to job burnout: theoretical extensions

Person-environment misfit to job burnout

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the psychological mechanisms explaining the impact of fit on burnout based on meta-theories.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 199 employees participated in three waves with three-week intervals. Person-organization fit and person-job fit were measured in Wave 1, psychological-mechanism variables were measured in Wave 2, and burnout was measured in Wave 3.

Findings – Person-organization fit and person-job fit related to three components of job burnout via multiple psychological mechanisms.

Research limitations/implications – The findings help to extend existing theories on fit and burnout literature. The research advances the understanding of psychological mechanisms about how misfit leads to job burnout. It helps stimulate research interest to further investigation on their relationships and effects with other variables besides burnout. It also helps understand the construct of burnout.

Practical implications – For individuals, person-job fit should be achieved as well as person-organization fit to avoid burnout. Measuring organization-based self-esteem (OBSE), psychological capital, and role conflict may help employers to recognize early signs of burnout and to develop effective interventions to reduce burnout. The findings help better understand the value of P-E fit and effective interventions in burnout.

Social implications – It helps employees better select job and organization and adapt to the job and organization, reduce management cost, and keep mental health.

Originality/value – Two original contributions are that: it adopted three meta-theories to comprehensively investigate the psychological mechanisms explaining how misfit leads to burnout; and it integrated individual and environmental factors of burnout into one fit-based model, which treats the person as a subject rather than a passive agent.

Keywords Stress, Personal health, Managerial psychology

Paper type Research paper

Burnout is a psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy experienced in response to chronic work stress (Maslach, 1993; Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Burnout leads to many negative outcomes like lower job performance, lower job satisfaction, higher turnover, and higher health care costs (e.g. Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Shirom, 2003). Given the apparent undesirability of this syndrome, burnout has been a source of



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significant concern to organizational practitioners and researchers. However, while both individual and situational factors have been found to play important roles in reducing burnout (e.g. Maslach *et al.*, 2001), little research has explored the psychological mechanisms in burnout emergence from a person-situation fit perspective.

We aim to adopt meta-theories (i.e. environment processing, interactionist processing, and self-processing, see Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005) to examine the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of person-environment fit (P-E fit) on burnout. This fit-based framework and psychological perspective shifts from “treating the person as an agent” to “as a subject,” which is an advantage regarding interventions. In the following sections, we review the dimensions of burnout, its individual, situational, and fit factors, and propose our hypotheses.

Factors stimulating burnout

In the components of burnout, exhaustion refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources; cynicism reflects indifference or a distant attitude toward one’s work in general; and inefficacy refers to a decline in one’s feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work (Maslach *et al.*, 1996).

Previous research has examined several types of individual factors, such as personal resources (e.g. self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem, and optimism, see Hobfoll *et al.*, 2003), personality (e.g. Big Five personality, locus of control, self-esteem, see Bakker *et al.*, 2002), and individual demographic characteristics (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). These researchers aim to identify individuals who are vulnerable to burnout and who have personal resources to adapt to their work environments. Other researchers preferred not to alleviate burnout by changing the individual, because burnout is more of a social phenomenon than an individual one (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Job, occupational, and organizational characteristics were examined as situational factors explaining when burnout occurs (e.g. Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Actually, researchers should consider both situational factors and individual factors (e.g. Demerouti *et al.*, 2012), and their interactions (in terms of fit, see Maslach and Leiter, 1997, 2008) to cope with burnout.

The P-E fit literature includes many types of fit such as an individual’s compatibility with his or her vocation, organization, job, work group, and supervisors (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). The current research focussed on the impact of person-job and person-organization fit on burnout. person-job fit is narrowly defined as the relationship between a person’s characteristics and those of the job or tasks that are performed at work (Edwards, 1991). person-organization fit addresses the compatibility between people and the entire organization in terms of personality, value, climate, and goal (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Psychological mechanisms in burnout

The current research explores possible psychological mechanisms explaining the impact of person-organization and person-job fit on burnout based on a model developed from Ehrhart and Ziegert’s (2005) framework. This model depicts three overarching meta-theories focussing on the relationship between individuals and organizations (i.e. environment processing, interactionist processing, and self-processing).

Environment processing meta-theory

The environment processing meta-theory is composed of individual’s processing of information regarding environmental characteristics (Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005),

emphasizing the psychological meaning of situational factors. In the burnout literature, the environment processing characteristics include perceived job demands and job resources (the job demands-resources model, JD-R for short, see Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Job resources are assumed to activate a motivational process in employees to invest themselves in their role performances and reduce burnout (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Fernet *et al.*, 2012). According to Ehrhart and Ziegert (2005), the motivational impact of job resources would fall within the interactionist processing meta-theory. The environment processing mechanism leading to burnout has not been empirically explored. Many environmental demands are mentioned in the literature such as a high workload, time pressure, role conflict, and organizational politics (e.g. Crawford *et al.*, 2010). From the perspective of fit, role conflict is an important variable both containing environmental information and disclosing individual psychological cognitions/mechanisms of burnout.

Role conflict is defined in terms of congruence-incongruence in the requirements of the role (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). High person-organization fit individuals feel reduced conflict at work because of their compatibility with the organization, while low person-organization fit individuals feel elevated conflict. In contrast, both low and high person-job fit employees (having different levels of ability in their jobs) may or may not experience incongruence in different organizational requirements and feel role conflict. Previous research documented the relationship between person-organization fit and role conflict (e.g. Schwepker *et al.*, 1997; Verquer *et al.*, 2003). So we expect person-organization fit rather than person-job fit to be related to role conflict:

H1. Perceived person-organization fit negatively relates to role conflict.

According to role theories, individuals who perceived incongruence with the environment may experience more uncertainty, and have more conflict and ambiguity at work, resulting in dissatisfaction with their role, feelings of anxiety, and distortion of reality (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). Perceived role conflict stimulated by person-organization misfit are likely to make people perceive more hindrances and fewer challenges and resources at work, which leads to exhaustion. This mechanism can also be explained by the conservation of resources theory (COR for short, see Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993). When role demands at work threaten an individual's resources (when demands exceed resources), they cause strain and eventually lead to physical and emotional exhaustion.

But perceived role conflict may not directly lead to cynicism or inefficacy if people are competent and feel respected by the organization. Empirically, exhaustion is positively related to job demands (e.g. work overload, role conflict), whereas cynicism and inefficacy are not (Janssen *et al.*, 1999). The relationship between role conflict and exhaustion has been validated in many samples and groups (e.g. Janssen *et al.*, 1999; Jawahar *et al.*, 2007; Piko, 2006). Thus, we suggest:

H2. Perceived role conflict positively relates to exhaustion.

Interactionist processing meta-theory

The interactionist processing meta-theory focusses on the interaction between person and environment (Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005). Theories in this category emphasize transactional psychology between individual and situation, in which the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model (Schneider, 1987) is the most popular theory explaining the attitudes and behaviors related to fit. The ASA model argues that people are attracted to, and stay in, organizations they fit with because "the people make the place" (Schneider, 1987, p. 437). Individuals may accumulate positive psychological status and stimulate positive adjustment, therefore, experience less burnout in the

organizations they fit. Most importantly, the fit would provide a supportive environment for the development of a positive psychological status and of resources like work motivation (Fernet *et al.*, 2012) and psychological capital (PsyCap, see Avey *et al.*, 2010).

As more and more studies reported the relationship between fit and PsyCap (e.g. Avey *et al.*, 2010), between PsyCap and burnout (Cheung *et al.*, 2011), and the mediation effect of PsyCap (Wang *et al.*, 2012), we examine PsyCap as an interactionist processing mechanism in our model. PsyCap is a composite concept referring to an individual's positive psychological state of development (Luthans *et al.*, 2007), which results from positive cognitive and affective processing of the personal and situational factors at hand (Hannah and Luthans, 2008). Whatever the kind of P-E fit is, the interactionist processing meta-theory, like the ASA model, explains the relationship between P-E fit and positive psychological state (i.e. PsyCap). Thus, we suggest:

H3. Perceived person-job fit positively relates to PsyCap.

H4. Perceived person-organization fit positively relates to PsyCap.

PsyCap accrues through positive psychological constructs such as efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Luthans *et al.*, 2007). Since job demands were primarily related to exhaustion, whereas resources were more strongly related to the other two response dimensions (Leiter, 1993), resources induced by PsyCap may not directly reduce exhaustion, but help to satisfy the need for defensive coping (i.e. a distant attitude toward one's work, or cynicism, see Maslach *et al.*, 2001) and enhance self-efficacy:

H5. PsyCap negatively relates to cynicism.

H6. PsyCap negatively relates to inefficacy.

Self-processing meta-theory

The self-processing meta-theory proposes that information about the self-influences the relationship between perceptions of fit and outcomes (Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005). The social identity model (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) is in this category.

We propose that P-E fit would impact the rating of self. As social identity theory proposes, people define or locate themselves within society by classifying themselves into social categories on the basis of group membership, like the organization they work for (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Because the organization to which an individual belongs sends signals to society about him/herself, individual membership has implications for self-definition (Huguet *et al.*, 2009). Individuals who perceive incongruence with their environment experience cognitive dissonance and negative job attitudes, which may lead to a decline in self-definition. Joining a particular matched organization is a public expression of an individual's values (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), which may lead to an increase in self-definition. Such an identity role may explain the impact of P-E fit on organizational outcomes like burnout.

An important psychological variable in this meta-theory is OBSE (see Pierce *et al.*, 1989). Self-esteem has been argued to be an important variable in predicting who will be more likely to develop burnout, and rebuilding self-esteem has been proposed as part of the rehabilitation of burned-out employees (Rosse *et al.*, 1991). OBSE encompasses a sense of personal adequacy as an organizational member and a sense of having satisfied needs from their organizational roles in the past (Pierce *et al.*, 1989). When individuals perceived themselves fit in either their jobs or organizations, they are much more likely to obtain an increase in self-definition, which leads to high level of OBSE. It is

supported by previous research relating OBSE to person-job fit (e.g. Riordan *et al.*, 2001) and relating OBSE to person-organization fit (e.g. value congruence, see Naus *et al.*, 2007):

H7. Perceived person-job fit positively relates to OBSE.

H8. Perceived person-organization fit positively relates to OBSE.

According to self-consistency and self-enhancement effects in self-esteem (Pierce *et al.*, 1989), the way individuals react to life experiences varies as a function of their self-esteem. Individuals with poor self-esteem believe they are incapable, insignificant, unsuccessful, and unworthy, which might foster burnout (Rosse *et al.*, 1991). Individuals with high self-esteem will develop favorable work attitudes and behaviors, which is consistent with the self-cognition of competent individuals. So they are better able to deal with stressful encounters and thus experience less exhaustion. Meanwhile, the self-perceived value may serve as resources to change an individual's response to the experience of exhaustion as suggested by COR theory (Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993). Thus OBSE may reduce one's defensive coping (e.g. cynicism) and enhance the sense of efficacy to achieve self-consistency. It is consistent with previous research relating self-esteem to burnout dimensions (e.g. Janssen *et al.*, 1999; Rosse *et al.*, 1991):

H9. OBSE negatively relates to exhaustion.

H10. OBSE negatively relates to cynicism.

H11. OBSE negatively relates to inefficacy.

We added a path from P-J fit direct to inefficacy as inefficacy may develop in parallel with the other two burnout components (Leiter, 1993). Both perceived outside work status and inner exhaustion and cynicism are likely to erode individual effectiveness. Misfit work contents may directly stimulate a spontaneous self-rating as inefficacy, even the individual feels being valued and have positive motivations. Thus, P-J fit may explain extra variance in efficacy. Since exhaustion is found to be consistently and strongly correlated with cynicism across a wide range of organizational and occupational settings (Maslach *et al.*, 2001), and self-evaluative variables (e.g. OBSE) are proved to be related to PsyCap (e.g. Avey *et al.*, 2010), these variables were allowed to co-vary in the structural models. Figure 1 reflects the hypothesized relations.

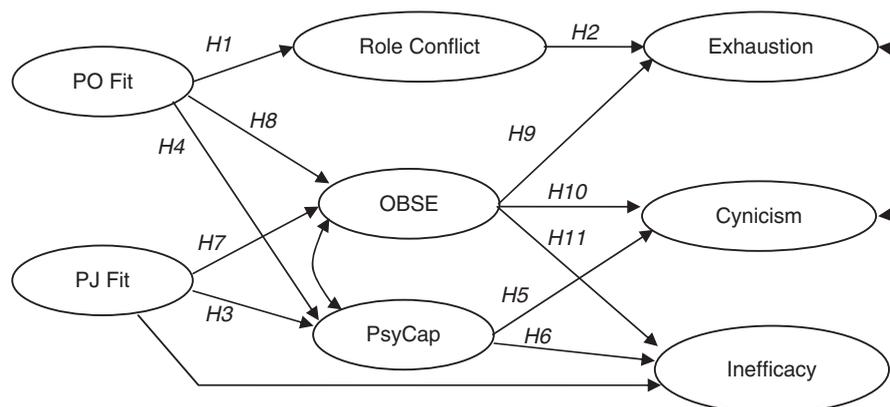


Figure 1. Hypothesized research model

Method

Participants and procedure

This study used a sample of 199 employees from a manufacturing organization in China, with many kinds of departments and jobs. Totally, 75.4 percent of the participants were in non-management positions. Participants ranged from 22 to 59 years ($M=32$, $SD=7$) with an average job tenure of 91 months ($SD=80$). Approximately 40 percent were male. Totally, 12 percent reported having less than a bachelor's degree, 88 percent had a bachelor's degree or beyond.

All the questionnaires were self-rated by participants in three waves with three-week intervals. Wave 1 collected employees' demographic information and their perceptions of person-organization and person-job fit. Wave 2 measured role conflict, PsyCap, and OBSE. Wave 3 measured burnout. Other measures like satisfaction (e.g. how about the pay and reward in this organization?) were used in each survey to reduce the surface validity. To retain anonymity, surveys in different waves were matched on the basis of a code number assigned to each employee. We sent out 269 questionnaires and received back 247 in Wave 1, 215 back in Wave 2, and 199 back in Wave 3.

Measures

All the scales we used in the present research were in Chinese. They were translated and back-translated by the standard procedure (Brislin, 1970).

Person-organization and person-job fit. Saks and Ashforth's (1997) perception of fit measure was adapted to measure person-organization fit (four items, $\alpha=0.90$) and person-job fit (four items, $\alpha=0.88$) on seven-point scale (1 = to a very little extent, 7 = to a very large extent). Example items are "To what extent is the organization a good match for you?" (person-organization fit) and "To what extent do your knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of your job?" (person-job fit).

Role conflict. Perceived role conflict was measured using the five items ($\alpha=0.78$) developed by Rizzo *et al.* (1970) on seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An example item is "I work under incompatible policies and guidelines."

PsyCap. Luthans *et al.*'s (2007) 24-item PsyCap Questionnaire ($\alpha=0.91$) was used to assess PsyCap. An example item is, "If I should find myself in a jam at work, I could think of many ways to get out of it." It was rated on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

OBSE. OBSE was measured by a six-item scale ($\alpha=0.89$) adapted from Pierce *et al.*'s (1989) OBSE scale on seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An example item is "I am taken seriously."

Burnout. Burnout was measured by 16-item Chinese Version (Lin *et al.*, 2013) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Maslach *et al.*, 1996) on seven-point frequency scale (0 = never, 6 = every day). It comprises three subscales: exhaustion (five items; e.g. "I feel emotionally drained from my work," $\alpha=0.89$), cynicism (five items; e.g. "I have become less enthusiastic about my work," $\alpha=0.81$), and inefficacy (six items; e.g. "At my work, I feel confident that I am effective at getting things done" (reverse scored), $\alpha=0.92$).

Results

Measurement model and descriptive statistics

To test the measurement model (Model 1), three item parcels reflected each latent construct. Item parcels were established by first fitting a single factor solution to items

of each construct, and then averaging the items with high and low loadings to form indicators (see Mathieu and Farr, 1991). The fit indices indicated that the model fit the data (McDonald and Ho, 2002). Comparison of alternative models in which: first, person-organization and person-job fit loaded on a single factor; second, role conflict, PsyCap, and OBSE loaded on a single factor; and third, the three dimensions of burnout loaded on a single factor did not result in improvement of fit over Model 1 (see Table I).

The means, standard deviations, estimated reliabilities, and correlations for the study variables are presented in Table II. Strong correlations were found between person-organization and person-job fit ($r = 0.71$) and between PsyCap and OBSE ($r = 0.53$).

Testing the hypothesized model

We assessed the fit of the hypothesized model by constraining relations among latent variables in the measurement model that were not included as structural paths in Figure 1 to be zero. The hypothesized model (Model 2) fits the data well (see Table I). It did not result in a significant decrease in fit when compared with the measurement

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	ECVI	SRMR
1. Model 1	409.74	224	1.83	0.065	0.96	2.84	0.048
2. Model 1a	550.55	231	2.38	0.084	0.94	3.48	0.058
3. Model 1b	1,304.98	237	5.51	0.15	0.84	7.23	0.18
4. Model 1c	1,138.29	237	4.80	0.14	0.84	6.39	0.11
5. Model 2	431.03	237	1.82	0.064	0.96	2.81	0.064
6. Model 3	437.62	240	1.82	0.064	0.96	2.82	0.068
7. Model 3a	435.40	239	1.82	0.064	0.96	2.82	0.067
8. Model 3b	435.56	238	1.83	0.065	0.96	2.83	0.068
9. Model 3c	435.29	239	1.82	0.064	0.96	2.81	0.070
10. Model 3d	432.94	235	1.84	0.065	0.96	2.84	0.065
11. Model 3e	448.32	241	1.86	0.066	0.96	2.86	0.082

Notes: $n = 199$. Model 3 is the final model. RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; CFI, comparative fit index; ECVI, Expected Cross-Validation Index; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual

Table I.
Summary of fit statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. P-J fit	0.90							
2. P-O fit	0.71**	0.88						
3. Role conflict	-0.21**	-0.38**	0.78					
4. OBSE	0.49**	0.46**	-0.22**	0.89				
5. PsyCap	0.34**	0.24**	-0.13	0.53**	0.91			
6. Exhaustion	-0.21**	-0.34**	0.29**	-0.14	-0.06	0.89		
7. Cynicism	-0.30**	-0.40**	0.25**	-0.44**	-0.36**	0.44**	0.81	
8. Inefficacy	-0.30**	-0.16*	0.02	-0.22**	-0.52**	-0.03	0.20**	0.92
n	199	199	199	199	199	199	199	199
M	4.89	4.43	3.85	4.98	4.38	2.13	1.82	2.96
SD	1.15	1.05	1.06	0.88	0.53	0.82	0.87	1.18

Notes: Numbers in diagonal are internal reliabilities. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for the study variables

model, $\Delta\chi^2(13) = 21.29$, ns. In this hypothesized model, the links between person-organization fit and PsyCap ($\gamma = -0.26$, $t = -1.92$, $p > 0.05$), between person-organization fit and OBSE ($\gamma = 0.05$, $t = 0.42$, $p > 0.05$), and between OBSE and inefficacy ($\beta = -0.12$, $t = -1.42$, $p > 0.05$) were not significant. By deleting these paths, the modified model (Model 3) did not result in a significant decrease in fit, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 6.59$, ns. Thus *H4*, *H8*, and *H11* were not supported.

We also analyzed several competing theoretical models to identify the best fit (James *et al.*, 1982). Compared with the hypothesized model (Model 3), the alternative models: (a) added a path from person-job fit to role conflict, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 2.22$; (b) added paths from role conflict to cynicism and inefficacy, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.06$; (c) added a path from PsyCap to exhaustion, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 2.33$; (d) added direct paths from person-job fit to exhaustion and cynicism, and from person-organization fit to three burnout dimensions, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 4.68$, all above p 's > 0.05 ; and (e) deleted the direct path from person-job fit to inefficacy, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = -10.7$, $p < 0.05$. The addition of paths (a-d) did not significantly improve the fit, while the deletion of the direct path (e) resulted in a significant decrease in fit. These results indicated that the modified hypothesized model (Model 3) provided the best fit for the data. This model accounted for 12 percent of the variance in role conflict, 18 percent in OBSE, and 13 percent in PsyCap. It also accounted for 15 percent of the variance in exhaustion, 32 percent in cynicism, and 18 percent in inefficacy.

Figure 2 presents the estimated standardized path coefficients for the best-fitting final model (Model 3). In this model, person-organization fit negatively related to role conflict ($\gamma = -0.34$, $p < 0.05$), supporting *H1*. Role conflict significantly predicted exhaustion ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$), supporting *H2*. *H3* was supported because person-job fit positively related to PsyCap ($\gamma = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$). *H5-H6* were supported because PsyCap negatively related to cynicism ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$) and inefficacy ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$). Person-job fit positively related to OBSE ($\gamma = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$), supporting *H7*. *H9-H10* were supported when OBSE negatively predicted exhaustion ($\beta = -0.37$, $p < 0.05$) and cynicism ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, person-job fit directly related to inefficacy ($\gamma = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$). Altogether, person-job fit had a significant indirect effect on exhaustion ($r = -0.16$, $p < 0.001$), cynicism ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.001$), and inefficacy ($r = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$). But, person-organization fit had no significant indirect effect on exhaustion ($r = -0.04$, $t = -1.72$).

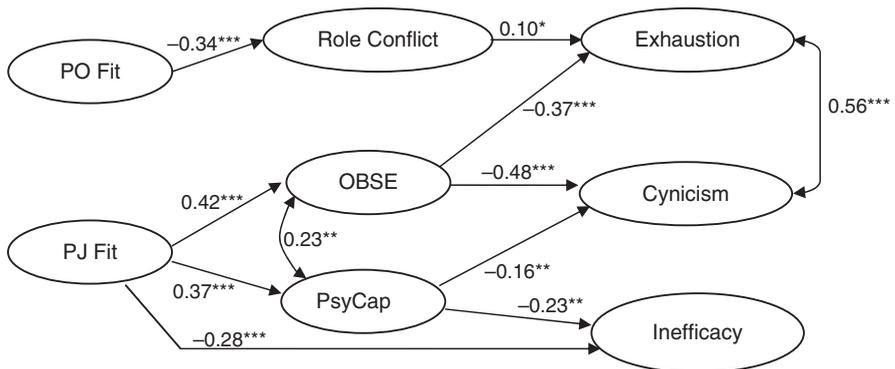


Figure 2. Final model with standardized path coefficients

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

We explored the psychological mechanisms through which person-job and person-organization fit relates to burnout based on three meta-theories. Significant indirect effects on different burnout dimensions were found. Specifically, role conflict (environment processing) mediated the relationship between person-organization fit and exhaustion. Moreover, PsyCap (interactionist processing) and OBSE (self-processing) were found to mediate the relationship between person-job fit and burnout dimensions. The interactionist and self-related variables were related mainly by person-job fit. They explained why person-job fit can lead to lower exhaustion and less negative responses to exhaustion (i.e. cynicism and inefficacy).

However, we found that OBSE (*H8*) and PsyCap (*H4*) were not related to person-organization fit, which is inconsistent with previous research (e.g. Naus *et al.*, 2007). A possible explanation may be the presence of highly correlated variables in the same model. person-organization and person-job fit are usually found to be highly correlated (e.g. Avey *et al.*, 2010). The relationship between OBSE or PsyCap and person-organization fit may be covered by those with person-job fit. We also found that OBSE was not related to inefficacy (*H11*). Similarly, the relationship may be covered by that between PsyCap and inefficacy, because of the strong correlation between PsyCap and OBSE.

Implications for research

Theoretical extension. The present research examined the psychological mechanisms from misfit to burnout, which went beyond burnout theories like JD-R model (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) and COR theory (Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993). While the existing literature has tried to relate demands, resources, and burnout, the inner mechanism why demands and resources stimulate burnout was not systematically disclosed. Our research model (stemming from three meta-theories linking individuals with organizations, see Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005) complements and extends existing burnout theories. As burnout symptoms are suggested to be chronic and prolonged (e.g. Maslach, 1993), it is important to diagnose the psychological states and processes in different burnout stages in the future.

Additionally, the psychological model we developed could be adapted to other research areas. We developed the framework based on Ehrhart and Ziegert's (2005) meta-theories relating individuals to organizations (e.g. attraction). Because the relationship between individuals and organizations and its inner psychological mechanisms may be universal or analogical, such research will help to stimulate research interest to further investigation on the psychological mechanisms relating fit to other dependent variables besides burnout.

Further understanding of the burnout concept. Exploring the psychological mechanisms helps further understand the burnout concept and the relationships among its dimensions. There were many criticisms to the theoretical distinctions and structure of burnout (e.g. Abraham, 2000; Maslach, 1998; Shirom and Melamed, 2006). Our findings provided theoretical grounds that these three dimensions/concepts of burnout are discriminative, and should be measured separately to indicate the complex symptoms of burnout. First, confirmatory factor analysis in this research confirmed the three-factor structure of burnout. It is consistent with previous findings that a model with a higher-order factor of "burnout" did not show a superior fit to the data (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002).

Second, we found that different psychological mechanisms lead to different burnout components. The three components are related to unique precursors, so they are empirically discriminative variables, as has been previously found (e.g. Halbesleben, 2006). Exhaustion, connected with environment and self-processing mechanisms, is not sufficient for describing the stable and chronic phenomena of burnout. Cynicism and inefficacy, connected with self and interactionist processing psychological mechanisms, help to indicate different levels of burnout. The relationship between burnout dimensions is consistent with previous evidence. For example, people with inconsistent burnout patterns (high exhaustion or cynicism only) showed more change in either direction (toward burnout or engagement) over time than those with both high exhaustion and high cynicism (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). Thus a high score in a single burnout dimension (e.g. high exhaustion only) may serve as a potential early warning indicator, rather than the sufficient equivalent of burnout.

A fit perspective in the burnout area. As fit or congruence factors are valued in explaining burnout in work (e.g. Maslach and Leiter, 1997, 2008), we adopted a fit perspective in our research. In this way, we could combine the situational factors, individual factors, and their interactions. It helps generate new ideas about burnout. For example, misfit in ability rather than individual ability may be a more important predictor of burnout. Misfit in ability may make an individual either lag behind or exceed requirements of an organization. Whatever the case, it may lead to low PsyCap and OBSE, which in turn leads to high burnout. There is a debate in the burnout literature about whether burnout results from overload (i.e. too many demands with too few resources) or from under-load (i.e. tedium and monotony, see Maslach *et al.*, 2001). The debate may be well resolved by understanding burnout from a fit perspective.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in the research. First, stressors at work and the initial levels of burnout need to be measured to better explain the emergence of burnout symptoms. Burnout symptoms are considered chronic and prolonged (e.g. Maslach, 1993), so it is beneficial to adopt dynamic psychological states and processes to identify early signs of burnout and changes in burnout levels. Stressors and burnout factors need to be measured in several waves to indicate change and development. Second, different fit perceptions and more specific fit measures should be used in future research to help understand the complete profile of fit on burnout. Third, data collected from just one company may limit generalization of our model. Exploring burnout differences in more samples among occupations in the future may help explain the developmental model of burnout stages and processes.

Practical implications

Our findings contribute to individuals, organizations, and society. At the individual level, it is important to choose the job type besides the organization to reduce the possibility of burnout, since both person-job fit and person-organization fit significantly predict outcomes.

At the organization level, understanding the employees' experience of burnout and its psychological processes will help employers respond wisely to such situations and come up with possible new interventions. The most important intervention may be to increase OBSE by helping employees succeed in their jobs. This would reduce exhaustion and cynicism. Feedback and participative management may be useful in

increasing OBSE (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Also, fulfilling the needs of employees and providing social support and encouragement may foster and increase their PsyCap. This would help reduce cynicism and inefficacy, and inject more vigor into the work as a positive response to energy and emotional exhaustion. This may be achieved by training (Luthans *et al.*, 2006). Further, perceived role conflict may be reduced by changes in organizational process management. Because role conflict violates two classical principles: chain of command and unity of command and direction in organizations (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970), interventions changing the organization (e.g. management change on command) may be effective.

Lastly, our findings help people understand that the psychological mechanisms underlying burnout are complex, and that we should try various strategies to reduce the possibility of burnout and to achieve healthier lives with increased well-being.

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