

BURNOUT AND ENGAGEMENT IN PORTUGUESE NURSES WORKING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Cristina Queirós^{1,2}, Sofia Dias^{1,2,3} & António José Marques^{1,4}



¹ Psychosocial Rehabilitation Laboratory (FPCEUP / ESTSPIPP) – Porto, Portugal

² Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences - Porto University, Portugal

³ School of Nursing - Viana do Castelo Polytechnic Institute, Portugal

⁴ School of Allied Health Sciences - Porto Polytechnic Institute, Portugal

www.labrp.com

cqueiros@fpce.up.pt

sofiadidas@ess.ipvc.pt

ajmarques@estsp.ipp.pt

1. Introduction

In their activities nurses deal with pain, suffering people and deficient work conditions related with physical aspects, emotional relationships within the teams and difficulties to adapt to new rules. Working with mental ill individuals increase the demands and some professionals become emotional exhausted, stressed and feel burnout, whereas others became motivated and engaged. According to recent literature professionals who take care of others become more tired and stressed (Buunk et al, 2010), and engagement can protect them from burnout, since it helps professionals to efficiently cope with stressful situations (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Burnout becomes an important area of research (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003), especially in occupations who deal with sick people, physically or mentally. This importance is even exalted in nursing if we consider the evidences demonstrated by literature revealing that emotional exhaustion of nurses can decrease the quality of health services (Vahey et al., 2004).

Key words: Burnout, Engagement, Nurses, Mental illness, Stress.

2. Aims

To identify burnout and engagement levels of nurses working with mental ill persons.

3. Methods

- Participants:** non-probabilistic sample of **110 Nurses** working in Psychiatric Departments of Oporto Hospitals; 79% were female; aged between 22-59 years (M = 37.65, SD = 10.01); 56% married, with children (53%); 13.28 average years in the department; 83% graduated and 17% with master; dealing with 6 – 12 patients daily schedule. If they can, 21% change of department, 34% change of hospital and 35% change of professional occupation. They feel moderately satisfied and motivated to do their tasks (in a Likert scale 1-5 points, respectively M=3.37, M=3.35) but at beginning of their careers they were more motivated (M=4.46).
- Instruments:** Individual and professional characterization Questionnaire; *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (M.B.I., Maslach & Jackson, 1997) and *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (U.W.E.S., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), Portuguese Versions (Marques-Pinto, 2009).
- Procedure:** Data was collected in two different Oporto Hospitals, during 2010, using self-completion questionnaire, anonymous and confidential, after formal authorization.
- Data analysis:** SPSS-17 was used to do a descriptive, *t Student* and correlation analysis (*R Pearson*).

4. Results

- Emotional exhaustion was identified in this sample of nurses, suggesting that they are at risk of developing burnout (Table 1), despite their higher personal accomplishment. The results are similar with other studies with nurses, showing a greater moderated emotional exhaustion, less depersonalization and a higher presence of personal accomplishment (Vahey et al., 2004). Comparative analysis between male and female reveal only males with depersonalization, traditional result reported by other studies (Schaufeli & Enzman, 1998). No differences were found using marital status, age or years of experience. Engagement presents higher values, especially dedication.
- Significant correlations were found between all dimensions of burnout and engagement (Table 2), as referred in international scientific literature, showing that high engagement is correlated with high personal accomplishment and low emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. As expected by other studies, negative dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) and engagement are negatively correlated with each other, while personal accomplishment is positively correlated with engagement.

Table 1. Means for burnout and engagement in sample and gender samples

| Dimensions (0 – 6 scale) | Samples | Total sample N = 110 | Male N = 23 | Female N = 87 | t (p) |
|--------------------------|---------|-------------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Emotional exhaustion | | 2,28 (1,233) | 2,74 | 2,16 | 1,725 (0,095) |
| Depersonalization | | 0,97 (1,014) | 1,63 | 0,80 | 2,784 (0,010**) |
| Personal accomplishment | | 4,488 (0,774) | 4,50 | 4,48 | 0,087 (0,931) |
| Vigor | | 3,99 (1,150) | 4,00 | 3,98 | 0,057 (0,955) |
| Dedication | | 4,27 (1,236) | 3,77 | 4,40 | -1,909 (0,066) |
| Absorption | | 3,67 (1,145) | 3,35 | 3,75 | -1,525 (0,130) |

*p < 0,050 **p < 0,010

Table 2. Correlations between burnout and engagement

| Burnout | Engagement | Vigor | Dedication | Absorption |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Emotional exhaustion | | -0,476 ** | -0,521 ** | -0,273 ** |
| Depersonalization | | -0,331 ** | -0,415 ** | -0,216 ** |
| Personal accomplishment | | 0,672 ** | 0,614 ** | 0,566 ** |

5. Conclusions

Despite low results of burnout in our sample, nursing is a professional activity that elicits stress, turns professionals vulnerable to burnout, especially when working with patients with special demands such as mentally ill people. However, engagement appears as a protective factor to feel burnout, allowing professionals to be dedicated and absorbed by their activity. Being engaged with work, permits providing a better care to the patients and to feel personal accomplishment. Lower values of depersonalization are an important result, since dealing with mentally ill persons sometimes leads professionals to be distant and cynic, eliciting low satisfaction towards patients. Our sample reveals already some emotional exhaustion, but little depersonalization.

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