

# The Effects of Psychological Capital on Public Employees' Burnout: An Example From Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of this study is to review the effects of psychological capital on employees' burnout in the work environment. This research is paired with Self-Efficacy Theory, which emphasizes that the results of efforts and performances are the most significant sources of self-efficacy.

**Methodology:** Data collected from 416 Turkish workers employed at public institutions in Turkey were included in the analyses to identify the effects of psychological capital on burnout by using two different types of scales (burnout and psychological capital scales) into a single questionnaire form with Likert-type response scale. Beside the Reliability Analysis, different statistical valuation methods –such as regression and correlation analyses– have also been used.

**Findings:** The results of analyses conducted on the sample of 416 Turkish workers reveal that statistically significant relationships appear between self-efficacy and depersonalization, hope and low personal accomplishment, optimism and emotional exhaustion, optimism and depersonalization. Optimism is negatively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization while positively and insignificantly related to low personal accomplishment. Both self-efficacy and optimism are significantly effective in explaining depersonalization. Hope positively and significantly contributes to explain the low personal accomplishment level of employees. On the other hand, optimism negatively and significantly contributes to emotional exhaustion.

**Implications:** As found in the results of this research, optimism will decrease emotional exhaustion. Resilient people can more easily adapt to changes in life. Organizations may focus not only on improving organizational structure but also foregrounding workers' positive personality traits and healthy psychological capital systems.

**Value:** This research which emphasizes the effects of psychological capital on burnout levels of employees is as valuable as others in relevant literature with different research results which are more valuable than the other.

**Keywords:** psychological capital, exhaustion, positive characteristics, burnout

JEL: M1, M10

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## Introduction

Burnout is a result of physical, psychological, and mental gaps of prolonged negative situations with which workers cannot cope (Crampton et al., 1995). Burnout was first determined by Herbert J. Freudenberger in 1974 (Kutanis and Tunç, 2010). Furthermore, Christina Maslach advanced burnout as a psychological notion in 1981, with the support of Susan E. Jackson as the first researcher.

Burnout can clearly be defined as mental and physical exhaustion of energy (Budak and Sürgevil, 2005), mainly caused by interpersonal and emotional stress factors in the workplace. Moreover, Burnout is characterized by different subjective reactions based on individual biological structure.

Burisch (2006) indicates that there is a common mistake about burnout that has been often mistaken for stress. Though the symptoms of these two facts may be quite similar, there are important distinctions. Stress can reinforce burnout, but it is not the main cause of burnout. Stressed people can still imagine, work, think, and generate an idea (Smith, Segal and Segal, 2015). On the other hand, people who experienced burnout often do not see any hope of positive change in their situations and even in their life. Stressed people who are physically damaged lose their energy while burned out. Besides, emotionally damaged people lose their motivation and hope. Eventually, scholars believe that burnout makes people “lose the capacity to provide the intense contributions that make an impact” (Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach, 2008, p. 205).

According to Cherniss (1980), burnout means a lack of professional interest in work depending on job stress and tension. In this case, Smith et al. (2015) emphasize that not only stress and stressful work cause burnout but also too many responsibilities and other factors, including personal lifestyle and certain personality traits. There are three main dimensions of burnout, which are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment.

Psychological capital emphasizes personal psychological sources with its basic four components (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency; Gooty et al., 2009). Therefore, psychological capital is associated with the theory of positive psychological capital. Brandt, Gomes, and Boyanova (2011, p. 267) note that “the concept of psychological capital is central in positive psychology.”

An organization’s success depends on the psychological and physical participation of human resources like workers, employees, and managers. In this manner, the optimum

utilization of effectual management to actualize goals will bring a competitive advantage for the entire organization.

This research is paired with Self-Efficacy Theory which explains personal feelings, beliefs, and perceptions as the common goals in the workplace (Bandura, 1977). Bandura also emphasizes that four main factors in Self-Efficacy Theory are effective on the increase of individual perceptions of self-efficacy, such as mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, or somatic/emotional states (Pajares, 2002; Soran, 2017).

The relationship between the research variables can be explained theoretically through this theory, as it emphasizes the most important sources of self-efficacy, such as positive and negative outcomes about past experiences of individuals along with the results of their efforts and performances.

Bolat (2011) notes that people with high perceptions of self-efficacy will also have a high level of control at work. Consequently, this will help to safeguard individuals from burnout syndrome. Ann Masten et al. (2002) also highlight that resilient people can succeed and learn something from mischance. These resilient people can more easily adapt to changes in life. Others indicate that resiliency can be developed and managed from the other three basic components of psychological capital (self-efficacy, hope, and optimism; Luthans et al., 2007c).

When considering the place of Self-Efficacy Theory in business life, we may say that this theory explains the feelings, beliefs, and perceptions of employees that wish to achieve the desired goals (Bandura, 1977). People with high levels of self-efficacy force themselves to gain different experiences with different tasks and feel that they are qualified and sufficient for succeeding in difficult jobs. These people know how to manage personal stress and conflicts at work (Soran, 2017), not to mention prevent burnout and defend from the negative outcomes of burnout.

## The Conceptual Framework

### Burnout

Schwab, Schuler, and Jackson (1986) define burnout as a “crisis of inexperience.” Burnout syndrome is examined from different perspectives. Clinical psychology investigates the indicators and mental effects of burnout syndrome, while social psychology concentrates on the work environment, work relations, and productivity. On the other

hand, industrial psychology researches productivity, job satisfaction, leave of employment, and absenteeism in addition to burnout (Laugaa, Rascle and Schwetizer, 2008).

Now, there is a broadly accepted definition created by Christina Maslach, one of the leading researchers on job burnout, who develops the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). According to Maslach, burnout is a psychological syndrome, which involves emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment that may occur among various professionals who work with others in various challenging situations (Maslach, 1982).

Diverse studies show that different factors and reasons lead to burnout: social support, social security, personality, and expectations (Arı and Bal, 2008); too many responsibilities without inviting others to help, lack of sleep, insufficient time to relax (Smith et al., 2015); gender (Ardı and Polatçı, 2008); academic background (Çam, 2001); marital status (Maslach, Jackson, 1981); organizational applications and regulations (Iacovides, Fountoulakis, Kaprinis and Kaprinis, 2003); mismanagement, economic troubles, unfavorable work conditions, and conflicts of interest (Albrecht, 1988). However, it is generally known that typical causes of burnout originate from work, namely due to personal differences, personality traits, expectations, lifestyle, and management types. Nevertheless, we may encounter burnout in all paths of life.

Burnout may form in a process that involves different dimensions and in almost every profession and workplace environment. Usually, some of the job stressors or other indicators lead to a personal (emotional) exhaustion, which usually causes burnout, followed by depersonalization in reaction to stressors and a lack of personal accomplishment at work. All of them are dimensions of burnout that “grow in parallel with each other” (Mohammadi, Moshfegh and Joyami, 2015, p. 58).

Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of energy and emotional resources “due to excessive psychological demands” (Maslach, 1998, p. 68). Emotionally exhausted individuals feel physically tired, spent, daunted, unexcited, and unhappy. These people think there is nothing that can make them happy and excited in the workplace and in life. Moreover, burned out individuals feel they cannot stand the situation and have no power to overcome all the negative feelings (Maslach and Jackson, 1984). For them, the necessity to go to work every day is a source of anxiety (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001). Emotionally exhausted individuals do not have enough motivation to start another day and meet another person (Sweeney and Summers, 2002).

As Maslach et al. (1984) note, the second step of burnout syndrome is depersonalization, which involves behaving toward others as if they were objects. It refers to the strict, cold, and distanced attitude to others. Distance is the main behavioral pattern of the second step of burnout syndrome. It is important to note that high mean scores for both emotional burnout and depersonalization indicate the high level of burnout (Maslach et al., 1981).

The third fundamental component of burnout is the lack of the perception of personal success, which is involved in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). According to Işıkkhan (2004), individuals who develop negative thoughts for others after the second step of burnout will begin to negatively think about themselves as well. In other words, the worker who judges himself as “unsuccessful” will also cause to have low personal accomplishment (Izgar, 2001). Maslach and Jackson argue that all these components of burnout are related to each other (Kim, Shin and Swanger, 2009).

## Psychological Capital

The concept of positive psychological capital originates in “post-modern positive psychology” (Wyk, 2013, p. 1023) and includes the strengths and positive aspect of human behavior. Martin Seligman first discussed these concepts in 1999, and they were subsequently developed by Luthans and colleagues in 2004 in the USA (Erkmen and Esen, 2012).

Psychological capital or positive psychological capital emphasizes positive approaches, meanings, and results. These concepts are also described as “a common underlying capacity considered critical to human motivation, cognitive processing, striving for success, and resulting performance in the workplace” (Peterson et al., 2011, p. 429).

Besides, it is not true to mostly or totally focuses on the positiveness and ignores the negative points since positive organizational behavior aims to combine all negative and positive parts of individuals and, thus, aims to improve human resources and increase organizational performance (Polatçı, 2014). Demir (2011) also highlights that since the beginning of management researches which began with the Hawthorne Studies, the relationships between psychological emotions of employees and their performance and efficiency are hypostatized.

Different sources describe psychological capital as the core construct that consists of four positive resources (Luthans et al., 2007a; Luthans, Youssef and Avolio, 2007b). These resources such as hope, resiliency, self-efficacy, and optimism, also define the features of psychological capital.

Self-efficacy can be thought of as an internal factor that directs people and effectively executes different tasks and roles in their lives. Friedman and Schustack (2012) note that Bandura research emphasizes that people have different beliefs and characteristics in their self-efficacy for different tasks. Bandura also foregrounds that personal self-efficacy is the most significant motivator of individual success. From this point of view, self-efficacy as a dimension of psychological capital is explained in detail with the Self-Efficacy Theory, founded at the end of the 1970s by Bandura.

Achieving the desired goals requires a sense of agency and expectations, which provide people an “internalized determination and willpower to invest the energy.” Hope supports the desire for positive outcomes and gives workers the sense that they can fulfill their desires and “make dreams come true” in their lives (Luthans and Youssef, 2004, p. 153). Hope can be defined as energy focused on personal goals and an (alternative) way that guides people to them (Snyder, Irwing and Anderson, 1991).

One can confuse hope with optimism. Hope is described as a pathway to achieve goals (Page and Donohue, 2004), while Snyder et al. (1991) determine that hope is a motivational state which has two dimensions: agency and pathway. Agency is a determination that directs goals, while a pathway is described as a plan to achieve desired goals. “Hope, similarly to optimism, is based on the expectation-value model of motivation” and provides alternative solutions to optimism about positive approaches (Lehoczky, 2013, p. 32).

Optimism is related to positive expectations for the best outcomes, important for personal and psychological moods and health. Research by Hmieleski and Carr (2007) demonstrates that optimism and personal well-being have a positive relationship with psychological capital. As Keleş (2011) proposes, optimism is a generalized expectation of a better future.

Resiliency can be defined as a recovery against adversity or stressful conditions and provides for recovery from previous or present unfavorable events (Page et al., 2004). This psychological capital dimension has a reactionary character (Masten and Reed, 2002), which enables people to orient themselves in all manner of situations they might face in life. Psychological resiliency is characterized as the ability to “bounce back” by focusing on goals and success (Richardson, 2002).

Finally, Bandura (2008) emphasizes that these four positive dimensions interact in synergy, as briefly mentioned above. Bandura suggests that hopeful people are more resilient and motivated to deal with difficulties in their lives, while self-confident

people can more easily adapt to adversity and apply their optimism and resiliency (Luthans, Youssef and Avolio, 2007c).

## Methodology

This study used statistical package programs and techniques to conduct the analysis. Beside the Reliability Analysis, the study applied different statistical valuation methods – such as regression and correlation analyses – to analyze the effects of psychological capital on burnout. Data collected from 416 Turkish workers employed at public institutions in Turkey were included in the analyses to identify the effects of psychological capital on burnout.

According to the variables, we compiled two different types of scales into a single questionnaire form with Likert-type response scale from 1 to 5, indicating responses of “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5).” Burnout scale consists of 22 items with three dimensions (emotional exhaustion with 9 items, depersonalization with 5 items, and low personal accomplishment with 8 items). Each dimension was examined on this scale, with a different number of items.

Psychological Capital scale includes 24 items and 4 dimensions (self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency) by way of 6–6 items created by Luthan et al., which we used to measure the effects upon the relationship between personality traits and burnout.

The study distributed 500 questionnaire forms to different randomly selected public institutions in different cities in Turkey and 420 returned to contribute to the analysis process. The rate of return was 84 percent, as 416 of all returned survey data were used in analyses, with 42 percent women and 58 percent men; the majority of participants ( $n = 301$ , 72 percent) were married.

### Hypotheses (H):

- Ha: Self-efficacy has a significant effect on emotional exhaustion.
- Hb: Self-efficacy has a significant effect on depersonalization.
- Hc: Self-efficacy has a significant effect on low personal accomplishment.
- Hd: Hope has a significant effect on emotional exhaustion.
- He: Hope has a significant effect on depersonalization.
- Hf: Hope has a significant effect on low personal accomplishment.
- Hg: Optimism has a significant effect on emotional exhaustion.

Hh: Optimism has a significant effect on depersonalization.

Hi: Optimism has a significant effect on low personal accomplishment.

Hj: Resiliency has a significant effect on emotional exhaustion.

Hk: Resiliency has a significant effect on depersonalization.

Hl: Resiliency has a significant effect on low personal accomplishment.

## Findings

### Reliability Analyses

First, reliabilities for each of the two main variables and their basic components were tested – three components for burnout and four components for psychological capital – beside overall and separate reliability tests.

The dimension of emotional exhaustion has 9 items with Cronbach alpha at  $\alpha = 0.889$ ; depersonalization has 5 items with Cronbach alpha at  $\alpha = 0.875$ ; while low personal accomplishment has 8 items with Cronbach alpha at  $\alpha = 0.778$ . Furthermore, overall Cronbach alpha coefficient for Maslach Burnout Inventory was found to be  $\alpha = 0.876$ . These coefficients suggest that the scales have internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ; Nunnally, 1978).

The Cronbach alpha for each component of psychological capital has been found at  $\alpha = 0.961$  for self-efficacy, at  $\alpha = 0.907$  for hope, at  $\alpha = 0.713$  for optimism, and at  $\alpha = 0.885$  for resiliency. Moreover, the overall reliability of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire was  $\alpha = 0.969$ . These coefficients suggest that the scales have internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ; Nunnally, 1978).

The results of Pearson Correlation Analysis demonstrate that there are statistically significant and negative relationships between all dimensions of psychological capital and two dimensions of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization at the  $p < 0.01$  significance level. On the other hand, we found no significant relationship between all dimensions of psychological capital and low personal accomplishment ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### Regression Analysis

We used Regression Analysis to test the effects of psychological capital on burnout. We inserted burnout dimensions in the analyses as dependent variables. First, the study tested emotional exhaustion and four dimensions of psychological capital to find that

a significant model appears with 43.539 F value at the 0.01 significance level (sig. = 0.000). Positive and insignificant relationship (sig. = 0.925,  $p > 0.05$ ) appears between self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the study finds negative and insignificant relationships between hope, resiliency, and emotional exhaustion. Optimism provides negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.156$ ) contribution to explain emotional exhaustion (sig. = 0.048,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Second, the study tested depersonalization as a dependent variable with four components of psychological capital, with a regression model as significant at  $F = 95.943$  and sig. = 0.000. Self-efficacy and optimism negatively and significantly contributed to the explanation of depersonalization with  $\beta = -0.375$  and  $\beta = -0.175$ . This reveals that the effect of self-efficacy on depersonalization is higher than optimism's effect with  $\beta = -0.375$ . On the other hand, depersonalization shows a negative relationship with all four dimensions of psychological capital; yet, there is an insignificant relationship between hope, resiliency, and depersonalization.

Third, the study shows a significant regression model at 0.05 significance level between low personal accomplishment and the four psychological capital dimensions. There is a negative relationship between low personal accomplishment, self-efficacy, and resiliency, whereas hope and optimism are in a positive relationship with low personal accomplishment. On the other hand, the results show that only hope represents a positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.485$ ) relationship with low personal accomplishment, while other three dimensions (self-efficacy, optimism, and resiliency) are in a statistically insignificant relationship.

These results allow us to accept hypotheses Hb, Hf, Hg, and Hh. The same results preclude the acceptance of the other eight hypotheses.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this study was to review the effects of psychological capital on employees' burnout at public work environment in Turkey. For a long time, researchers demonstrated that negative outcomes – including stress, depression, loss of motivation, a sense of failure, and employee turnover – that effect from burnout are not only related to individuals but also all organizations (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998). As Storm and Rothmann (2003) emphasize, high levels of burnout and its syndrome are related to the ineffectiveness in coping with different situations.

Some of the findings of the current study confirm previous results but would diverge from the main theme of this article. For instance, the results of this research represent a positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as Friedman and Rosenman (1974) emphasize in their research. Likewise, Çetin, Şeşen, and Basım (2013) highlight the negative relationship between optimism and emotional exhaustion, self-efficacy and depersonalization, resiliency and emotional exhaustion, which is verified by the findings of the study above. Based on our findings, we see that all four dimensions of psychological capital are in a negative relationship with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

In sum, the above statistical findings present important implications for the development and improvement of both personal life and work life quality. Organizations may focus not only on the improvement of organizational structure but also concentrate on foregrounding workers' positive personality traits and healthy psychological capital systems. This will be possible by giving employees a chance to be hopeful and optimistic about the future by providing clear and intelligible organizational culture and simplifying job formalities. After all, our research findings show that optimism is negatively related to depersonalization.

As mentioned, to protect employees against emotional exhaustion, managers should focus on developing their hopes about the future. But managers should not forget that hope relates positively to low personal accomplishment. Besides, managers should also improve employees' beliefs about their capabilities (self-efficacy) and optimism so as to protect them from depersonalization in the workplace environment. As our research reveals, optimism will decrease emotional exhaustion. Hope positively and significantly contributes to explain low personal accomplishment level of employees. Last but not least, managers and organizations should teach employees how to deal with difficult life-changing events. Thus, employees will also learn to cope with the feeling and fear of low personal accomplishment.

Managerial personality traits are important to notice burnout in an organization. Depending on these traits, individuals know that burnout is a factor that gradually decreases emotional energy. Flexibility and freedom may be created within the organization to reduce the number of burned-out individuals.

Supportive managerial approaches, openness for communication, and feedback to workers should be generalized in organizations so as to avoid burnout, develop permanent positive relationships, and protect psychological capital (Ashforth, Saks and Lee, 1997).

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## Appendix – Tables

**Table 1.** Cronbach alpha coefficients for each scale and components

Main Variables	Dimensions of the Main Variables	Number of Questions/Items	Cronbach's Alpha
BURNOUT	Emotional Exhaustion	9	0.889
	Depersonalization	5	0.875
	(Low) Personal Accomplishment	8	0.778
	OVERALL	22	0.876
PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL	Self-Efficacy	6	0.961
	Hope	6	0.907
	Optimism	6	0.713
	Resiliency	6	0.885
	OVERALL	24	0.969

**Table 2.** Mean, standart deviation, and correlation results

	Mean	St. Deviation	Burn_ EmoExha	Burn_ Depers	Burn_ PersAcc	PsyCap_ SelfEffic	PsyCap_ Hope	PsyCap_ Optim	PsyCap_ Resili
Burn_ EmoExha	3,0616	,93166	1	,782**	-,101*	-,510**	-,531**	-,501**	-,529**
Burn_ Depers	3,0755	1,04334		1	-,112*	-,680**	-,671**	-,620**	-,668**
Burn_ PersAcc	2,1418	,42425			1	,043	,089	,061	,039
PsyCap_ SelfEffic	2,9395	1,13311				1	,937**	,792**	,939**
PsyCap_ Hope	2,9764	,99047					1	,828**	,932**
PsyCap_ Optim	2,9417	,91576						1	,840**
PsyCap_ Resili	2,9394	1,02705							1

**Table 3.** Relationship between psychological capital and emotional exhaustionCoefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	4,667	,135		34,604	,000
	PsyCap_ SelfEffic	,011	,114	,013	,094	,925
	PsyCap_ Hope	-,227	,127	-,241	-1,779	,076
	PsyCap_ Optim	-,159	,080	-,156	-1,984	,048
	PsyCap_ Resili	-,168	,128	-,186	-1,311	,191

a. Dependent Variable: Burn\_ EmoExha

**Table 4.** Relationship between psychological capital and depersonalizationCoefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5,227	,130		40,337	,000
	PsyCap _ SelfEffic	-,346	,110	-,375	-3,153	,002
	PsyCap _ Hope	-,134	,122	-,127	-1,095	,274
	PsyCap _ Optim	-,199	,077	-,175	-2,587	,010
	PsyCap _ Resili	-,051	,123	-,051	-,417	,677

a. Dependent Variable: Burn \_ Depers

**Table 5.** Relationship between psychological capital and low personal accomplishmentCoefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,008	,072		27,780	,000
	PsyCap _ SelfEffic	-,075	,061	-,201	-1,230	,219
	PsyCap _ Hope	,208	,068	,485	3,044	,002
	PsyCap _ Optim	,011	,043	,024	,255	,798
	PsyCap _ Resili	-,101	,069	-,244	-1,464	,144

a. Dependent Variable: Burn \_ PersAccomp