A question of burnout among Reformed Church ministers in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT The present study examined to which degree reformed ministers suffer from burnout symptoms, to which degree these symptoms are comparable with other occupational groups and which organizational and personal traits like extroversion and emotional stability, increase the risk of falling victim to burnout. Ministers (n = 424; 83% men, 17% women) completed the following questionnaires: a work-factor questionnaire, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the extroversion and emotional stability Personality Inventory. Ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church had identical scores on the three burnout dimensions as their reformed counterparts, a more doctrinal denomination. Compared with workers in other human service professions, ministers scored lower on the three burnout dimensions. Ministers who seriously suffered from pressure of work had high scores on the three dimensions of burnout. Young ministers proved to be more susceptible to burnout than their older counterparts. Gender did not contribute to the onset of burnout. However, lack of social support at home, satisfaction, and motivation may have influenced the ministers’ burnout level. Personality factors, such as extroversion and emotional stability, appeared to be significantly related to burnout. Tasks found to be weighty were: to conduct a service and to prepare sermon, pastoral care, administration or managerial and organizational tasks, catechism and meetings. Suggestions for future investigations were made.

Introduction

In 1974, Freudenberger used the term ‘burnout’ to describe a situation of physical and emotional exhaustion among young social workers who were employed in substance abuse projects. He pointed at the finding that especially idealistically motivated individuals run the risk of becoming emotionally exhausted. They work too hard, too long and are involved in too many troubles. They act in this way because of their emotional engagement in their work, which is also characterized by cherishing unrealistic expectations.
After only a short while, burnout became a popular construct that was used as an umbrella term for all kinds of problems individuals experienced in their job setting. Schaufeli (1990a, b) concludes that initially burnout studies emphasized the clinical description of the syndrome, but in the course of the Eighties attention shifted to a statistical analysis of the background of the phenomenon. The reason was that from that time questionnaires for the measurement of burnout were available.

How can burnout be recognized, which symptoms can help diagnose the syndrome burnout? Schaufeli (1990a, b) concludes that there is an almost unanimous agreement on the core of burnout, which can be best described as a situation of exhaustion or extreme fatigue. Less agreement is found on other aspects of burnout. Empirical studies in general accept Maslach and Jackson’s (1981) instrument to measure the various dimensions of burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory), which makes their description of burnout the one that is most widely used in empirical research (see Schaufeli, 1990a).

Maslach and Jackson (1981, p. 1) describe burnout as follows: ‘Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity’. They describe the three dimensions in the following way. Emotional Exhaustion refers to the feeling of having depleted all one’s emotional reserves. Depersonalization refers to a negative, cynical and impersonal attitude towards the people one works with. In contrast to the psychiatric connotation, depersonalization in a social psychological setting does not refer to the alienation of the Self, but to the estrangement towards the people one daily works with or for. A reduced sense of personal accomplishment refers to the feeling of incompetence in the work setting, which is accompanied by negative self-evaluations concerning professional achievements.

In line with the three dimensions of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) consists of three sub-scales that measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, respectively. Reliability tests of the MBI (Schaufeli, 1990a, b) showed that the emotional exhaustion sub-scale is the most reliable of the three, Cronbach’s alphas vary between 0.80 and 0.90. The other two sub-scales appeared to have Cronbach’s alphas between 0.70 and 0.80, which may be considered sufficient for research purposes according to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). It appears that the MBI is used in about 90% of all studies on burnout. Although burnout was first and foremost considered to occur among human service professionals, the phenomenon was also found among other professions and vocations. To this end the MBI has been adapted to specific categories of occupations. Besides the MBI-HSS/ES (Human Services Survey/Educators Survey), the MBI-GS (General Survey) has been developed. In short, we may conclude that burnout seems to occur among a wide array of occupations, albeit that one of its manifestations, depersonalization, is specific for human service professionals only.

Burnout develops in a downward-spiralling process, consisting of various stages. The onset of the process is believed to take place within the individual.
A crucial role in the process is played by the professional's expectations, which are often connected with personal and universal motives. Especially unreal expectations are mentioned by Edelwich and Brodsky (1980).

Schaufeli (1990a) gathered from various data that 10–25% of the labour force suffer from the burnout syndrome, with peaks at 40% among workers in certain occupational groups. It also appears that occupational groups are characterized by specific burnout symptoms.

The most striking demographic feature that is found to be related to burnout is the age of the workers. Young individuals between 30 and 40 report higher scores on burnout than older individuals do (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Burnout especially crops up at the beginning of the individual's professional career. Results are not unambiguous when it comes to differences in the onset of burnout between male and female individuals: some studies report higher levels of burnout among women than among men, however, the opposite result is also found (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

With regard to the civil status, it appears that unwed individuals (especially men) are more prone to fall victim to burnout than married individuals. Singles score higher than divorced people. Individuals who receive higher education also appear to be more vulnerable to burnout, which may be attributed to the finding that they run a fairly great chance that the high expectations about their professional career will not come to fruition. Furthermore, they often bear responsibility for people they are in charge of, which may lead to more work stress (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

In the last twenty years, many individuals, companies and public health institutions have increasingly been confronted with stress and burnout (Van der Ploeg & Vis, 1989). The rapid spread of symptoms of burnout among workers of industrialized countries cannot solely be attributed to work-related factors but also to social, ideological and cultural factors (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In all industrialized countries the service industries have expanded enormously. New professions emerged, such as in the fields of nursing, education, and social welfare. The increase in numbers of professionals in this sector has been accompanied by an increase of manifestations of symptoms of burnout. It may be possible that today many more individuals than ever before are confronted with the emotional demands that go along with working for other people daily. People describe the causes of their personal worries and difficulties more psychologically than people did some decades ago. Stress plays a pivot role in this 'labelling process' as it is considered to be the main cause of the majority of the problems. The term 'stress' is no longer a technical term only used by the social sector, but rather a term to denote negative experiences in someone's life. The use of the term 'stress' in this connotation has turned it into a cultural symbol of our time. Inquiry into stress and the creation of new jobs in the human service professions may have helped disseminate the term 'stress'. The increasing use of the term 'stress' appears to be related with the popularity of the term 'burnout' (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).
Individuality seems to be one of the most striking features of industrialized societies—more people are socially isolated. Formerly, communes and churches provided for safe and social surroundings. At present, community of faith and church do not play a very important part in the lives of most people in the Netherlands (Central Statistical Office, 1999, 2003). It means that each individual is deemed to be responsible for the creation and maintenance of his or her own social network, which is often viewed as a very taxing assignment. Our individualistic society often makes people feel isolated and estranged in a hostile world. The urgency of social support is sorely felt, but not often received, and its absence enhances the possible development of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

Another problem of the last few decades is the strong increase of mental and emotional workloads for professionals. Mutual relations in the workplace are deteriorated by experiences of competition; the increase of large numbers of potential workers made it possible for employers to make more demands on employees. For example, the latter are expected to be pliable, they are expected to make decisions quickly in difficult circumstances, and they have to be able to work productively under great pressure. These developments lead to increasingly heavier emotional pressure of work, found to be related to an increase of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

An additional reason that may explain the rise in burnout is found in different outlooks, thoughts and opinions of novice professionals when compared with experienced professionals (Cherniss, 1980). Cherniss asserts that these different outlooks from novice professionals on the job influence the development of burnout. He mentions five aspects: Competence: novice professionals are expected to be as proficient as their experienced counterparts. However, much is to be learned by practical experience. Autonomy: professional status is generally associated with power of decision. However, professionals are often confronted with red tape, interference in many aspects of the job, stringent rules and fixed schemes of work. Novice professionals do cherish these aspects of work and may therefore become very frustrated when their expectations are dashed. Outcomes of work: professionals who received higher education often expect their jobs to be challenging, interesting, and varied (multi-faceted). These expectations do not always come true. Collegiality: not every professional appears to have good relations with his or her counterparts. Many professionals work alone and consequently have little contact with other professionals. In some cases professionals are even involved in rivalry and competition with their colleagues, which may lead to extra stress. The clients’ attitude: it is often believed that the professional’s clients are thankful, honest, and cooperative in their attitudes towards the professional. This seems to be not entirely true. Some clients are not only ungrateful in some cases, they also lie and cheat; moreover, they sometimes try to manipulate professionals to reach their own goals, and even refuse to avail themselves of the professionals’ services.

The discrepancy mentioned before between expectancies and reality may lead to frustrations, stress, pressure of work, little social support, little job-control,
no job satisfaction and lack of understanding among professionals. These job-related aspects may easily lead to the onset of burnout. In sum, it may be said that the enormous changes in our society, and of our cultural environment may be largely held responsible for the burnout phenomenon.

**Burnout among ministers of reformed churches**

It may be concluded from the foregoing exposé that burnout is developed in a prolonged process of (harmful) stress which is brought about by the interaction between demanding working conditions and the ensuing personal reaction. A minister does not only have to cope with demanding work situations, but also with work-related stressors such as pressure of work and time, long working days, role conflict and role ambiguity. Moreover, he or she frequently has to attend parishioners who are seriously, chronically or terminally ill.

According to Eadie (1975) ‘the personality type most commonly found in the ministry is best described as the helping personality. This type is principally motivated by altruistic ideals and wish to be helpful and concerned’ (p. 2). The concept of the helping personality was developed by Eadie (1975) out of a survey of [Church of Scotland] parish ministers.

We know from the literature that work- and client-related stressors are important indications of burnout (Karsten, 2000). Maslach and Leiter (1998) made a reasonable case for the finding that interpersonal factors were one of the most important aspects in the onset of burnout in human service professionals. Because assistance is a very important aspect in the work of ministers, and because they have to cope with the field of tension between their vocation and expectations of parishioners they work for, the ministers constitute a pre-eminently high-risk group (Erasmus, 1990).

The majority of burnout research concentrates on personal and situational factors. In 1997, Hall published a survey of empirical research findings of the last twenty years on the pastors’ personal (mental and spiritual) well-being. Hall distinguished six major dimensions in the literature available, namely emotional well-being, stress and coping, marriage and divorce, family, burnout, and personal shortcomings. One of the main conclusions from the work is that the interpersonal and relational problems ministers are confronted with can mainly be traced back to professional problems. So it is a matter of course to recognize these problems at an early stage. In the last few years, the ministers’ well-being has become an important topic. Burnout, closely related to the human service professions, is increasingly considered to be the resultant of the problems ministers have to cope with (Daniël & Rogers, 1981; Rodgerson, 1996). In research and interviews, ministers clearly reveal that the high demands they are faced with constitute potential negative effects on their mental and spiritual well-being. Another reason to investigate the welfare of ministers is that researchers realise that the ministers’ well-being is important for them to carry out their duties as leaders of an ecclesiastical community (Muse, 1992; Seat et al., 1993;
Thoburn & Balswick, 1994). Ministers having problems in the personal and relational sphere often experience problems as spiritual leaders of the ecclesiastical congregation. From the foregoing account it may have become clear that the way ministers function will have an effect on their personal efficaciousness.

Daniël and Rogers (1981) compared studies on burnout among human service workers, in general, with the ones among ministers, in particular. They concluded that symptoms among former ministers (marital problems, feelings of incompetence and personal failure, see Duncan, 1932) strongly resemble the symptoms of other human service workers who leave their job prematurely. Additional factors that may play a role in the onset of burnout among ministers are time constraints (Collins, 1977; Ellison & Mattila, 1983), role conflicts (Mills, 1968), and the gap between illogical expectations and the reality of daily routine (Ellison & Mattila, 1983; Faulkner, 1981).

Various empirical studies on burnout among ministers have been published. Browning (1982) who conducted correlational research on burnout among ministers, stressed situational factors. He concluded that the number of hours a minister devoted to church-related activities positively correlated with burnout, whereas the annual family holiday, a flexible time-table, a large social and professional network, and positive social support from the family showed a negative correlation with burnout. Interpersonal variables such as assertiveness and a good marriage were correlated with lower levels of burnout. Passive aggression, avoidance of conflicts, dependence, timidity, and weak expressivities all correlated with high levels of burnout (Congo, 1983). It is an interesting finding that ministers who indicate that they turn to God in the case of difficulties, suffer less from emotional exhaustion \( (r = -0.27) \) and depersonalization \( (r = -0.32) \) than ministers who do not. These facts are in line with results revealing that ministers who believe they can solve problems all by themselves without the help of God score higher on emotional exhaustion \( (r = 0.24) \) and depersonalization \( (r = 0.30) \). Moreover, the latter category scores lower on personal accomplishment \( (r = -0.24) \), (Rodgerson, 1996). Data from other human service professionals show that the most important ‘instrument’ that can be used to help other people is the human service worker him or herself. Although ministers initially were not considered to be human service professionals, it is evident that their relation with parishioners bears a strong resemblance with the category mentioned before (Eadie, 1975; Warner & Carter, 1984). Just as in the other human service professions, a minister’s emotional maturity and balance are regarded as the basis of pastoral activities. In order to be able to support the spiritual growth of the parishioners, the ministers themselves should emotionally grow and mature constantly and steadily. For that matter, it was shown that lack of emotional resources may result in professional care of a diminished and even poor quality (Guy, 1987).

In the Netherlands, a study was executed by Evers & Tomic (2003) among pastors who were listed in the Annual of the Dutch Reformed Church (1998) and who actually worked as pastors in a congregation (about 1210 pastors). They were sent questionnaires, and 726 of them completed and returned the forms. The
The main purpose of the study was to examine the level of burnout among the pastors. The results show that, except for teachers, the pastors’ burnout level is about as high as the burnout level among human service professionals and highly educated persons. The pastors of the reformed churches run a great risk of suffering burnout, to such a degree that it will be impossible for them to exercise their duties. In this respect the strongest correlation was found between pressure of work and burnout. Van der Leest (1997) concluded that a pastor’s task became heavier and heavier owing to the secularization and the concomitant proportional increase of the ageing population of the congregation. The growing awareness of the parishioners made their tasks more arduous. Role ambiguity and lack of social support also correlated with the onset of burnout. Pastors who received little or no support from colleagues, and pastors who experienced a gap between their own expectations and those of the parishioners, ran a greater risk of becoming burnt out. The question whether the size of the congregation correlates with burnout was not affirmed in the study. Neither did the authors find a correlation between age and burnout and gender and burnout. However, there was a weak correlation between the variables mentioned before, when the denomination was incorporated as a dependent variable. This finding especially applied to pastors of the ‘Evangelical denomination’ who scored somewhat higher on the dimensions of burnout than pastors of other denominations. This particular finding constituted the main reason for us to examine whether there were differences between pastors of the Reformed Churches and ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches.

Except for organizational-psychological factors, such as work situation and job satisfaction, social-psychological factors such as lack of social support and social standards, and demographic variables were found to correlate with burnout (Schaufeli & Buunk, 1996; Van Yperen, 1996, 1998). Many studies that incorporate personality factors make use of five basic personality features: extroversion, amiability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and autonomy. Each of these features proved to correlate with burnout to some degree. It was found, for instance, that extroversion correlated positively with personal accomplishment (Deary et al., 1996). Huebner and Mills (1994) found that high levels of burnout correlated with low levels of extroversion. Individuals who were extrovert by nature appeared to be less vulnerable to becoming burnt out. Neuroticism proved to be the strongest indicator of burnout in a study from Deary et al. (1996), because respondents scoring high on Neuroticism reported higher levels of work stress than other respondents did. In the study, work stress is regarded as an adequate indicator of burnout that was shown by high scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and low scores on personal accomplishment. The findings mentioned before, had already been reported by Piedmont (1993).

The aim of our study was first to examine whether ministers would suffer from burnout and if so to what degree. Second, we examined whether the level of burnout among ministers might be compared with the level of burnout among other professionals. Third, we examined which conditions were linked with and
influenced the origin of burnout (age, experience, pressure of work, lack of emotional stability) and the level of extroversion. Fourth, we intended to examine the development of pressure of work among ministers. Finally, we examined whether burnout correlated with the number of years the minister had been working in the present situation, gender, motivation, satisfaction, the extent to which ministers would choose another job if they could relive their lives again, and the degree to which ministers would like to change their job or switch to another congregation.

Method

Participants

All ministers of the Reformed Church that were listed in the Annual of Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (1999) and who were employed in a congregation ($n = 895$), were sent a questionnaire. Because of migration, death, or retirement, 122 ministers could not be contacted. In all, 424 (55%) completely filled-out questionnaires were returned, which is a response rate that is considered to be sufficient for survey-research according to Babbie (1994). In order to try to raise the response rate we followed suggestions from Green and Hutchinson (1996): we provided respondents with postage-free envelopes, we sent the questionnaires to the respondents directly, the respondents could contact us at any time if necessary, and we used a brief questionnaire. The respondents consisted of 352 (83%) male and 72 (17%) female ministers. Their mean age was 48.39 years, ranging from 29 to 68 (SD = 8.23). There was a significant difference between the mean age of male and female respondents: $t(422) = 5.89, p < 0.001$. The mean age for male respondents was 49.41 (SD = 7.41) and for female respondents 43.38 (SD = 7.99). The mean number of years of experience was 18.16 (SD = 8.90). The mean number of ministers per congregation was 2.68 (SD = 1.99). There was no significant difference concerning the variable ‘age’ of the 424 respondents, and the total population of ministers: $t(867) = 1.86, p > 0.05$. The same result applied to gender: $\chi^2(1) = 0.02, p \geq 0.05$.

Instruments

We used a questionnaire that was divided into three sub-questionnaires. Sub-questionnaire 1 asked the ministers about the various aspects of their job. Sub-questionnaire 2, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, measured the degree of burnout among the ministers. The last sub-questionnaire measured the ministers’ extroversion and emotional stability. Apart from these questions, we asked the respondents to provide us with biographical data. Finally, we added two open questions that were used to get an insight in the ministers’ pressure of work.
Sub-questionnaire 1. This instrument measures experienced pressure of work, role ambiguity and role overload, social support at home and in the workplace, motivation, and satisfaction. Respondents could answer the questions on a six-point scale, from 0 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Seven questions are on pressure of work (minimum score 0, maximum score 35), two questions are on role problems (minimum score 0, maximum score 10), seven questions are on social support (minimum score 0, maximum score 35), two questions on motivation (minimum score 0, maximum score 10) and four questions are on satisfaction (minimum score 0, maximum score 20).

Examples of questions on pressure of work are: I can organize my work in such a way that I will have finished it in time. There are so many questions I have to face that I have hardly any time left for my own spiritual development. Examples of questions concerning role problems and social support are: I am confronted with a diversity of expectations in my work as a minister. When I trouble about something, I can talk about it very easily with a fellow-minister. I am well taken care of at home when I have a lot of work to do. Examples of items on motivation and satisfaction are: I have chosen this profession, because I looked upon it as a vocation. If it were possible, I should like to be a minister in another congregation.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory. The MBI (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) is the most widely used instrument to measure burnout. It was translated into the Dutch language and validated by Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck (1994). It consists of 20 items on a seven-point scale. The MBI is divided into three sub-scales: emotional exhaustion (eight items, minimum score is 0, and maximum score is 48), depersonalization (five items, minimum score is 0, and maximum score is 30), and personal accomplishment (seven items, minimum score is 0, and maximum score is 42). The scores are computed separately for each sub-scale. High scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores on personal accomplishment are indicative of burnout. In a study on reformed pastors (n = 726), Evers & Tomic (2003) found Cronbach’s alphas of 0.88 for emotional exhaustion, 0.65 for depersonalization and 0.76 for personal accomplishment.

Examples of items on emotional exhaustion are: I feel mentally drained because of my work. I feel frustrated in my job. Examples of depersonalization are: I have the feeling I treat some of my parishioners in an impersonal way. I really do not care what becomes of my parishioners. Examples of items on personal accomplishment are: I am quietly managing emotional problems in my every day work. I think I can easily put myself in my parishioners’ position.

The internal consistency of the MBI is 0.90 for emotional exhaustion, 0.79 for depersonalization, and 0.71 for personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1986). The three factor structure of the MBI was confirmed in several studies (Schaufeli, 1990a, b). Hardly any data are known on the stability of the MBI (Schaufeli, 1990a, b). Maslach et al. (1986) mentioned results between 0.60 and 0.80 within a period of two to four weeks.
The Five-Factor Personality Inventory. The FFPI (Hendriks et al., 1999) measures the Big Five personality traits extroversion, amiability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and autonomy. We only incorporated extroversion and emotional stability in our study. The Five-Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI) consists of 100 brief, concrete statements that are used to measure the various personality traits. The difference between the FFPI and other personality inventories like the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) is that the FFPI measures personality traits whereas the NEO-PI-R measures adjectives. The features are measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not applicable at all) to 5 (completely applicable). The internal consistencies of the various dimensions were found to be sufficient: they vary from 0.86 for extroversion and conscientiousness, 0.85 for emotional stability, 0.84 for amiability, to 0.81 for autonomy. The five personality factors were found to be internally consistent, reliable, and valid when measured in a normally divided population.

There were 20 items on extroversion (minimum score 1, maximum score 100). Some examples are: Moves easily in company. Keeps others at a distance. Examples on emotional stability (20 items, minimum score 1, maximum score 100) are: Keeps emotions under control. Is at a complete loss.

Demographic data

The questionnaire ended with some items on demographic data, asking for the respondent’s age, gender, spouse, children, full-time or part-time job, number of years working as a minister, number of years working in the present congregation, the denomination one feels affinity for, and the number of ministers working in the congregation.

Two open-ended questions. Finally, the respondents could answer two open questions concerning (1) the most heavy task(s) and (2) what measures could be taken to make their work easier. Additional remarks could be added on the last page of the questionnaire.

Procedure

All reformed ministers listed in the Annual of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (1999) who work in a congregation were sent a questionnaire with an accompanying letter. Three weeks after the forms had been sent, the ministers received a follow-up letter.

Results

Cronbach’s alphas of the various sub-questionnaires were: pressure of work 0.77, social support at home 0.79, extroversion 0.87 and emotional stability 0.90. The alphas for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment
were 0.87, 0.68 and 0.79, respectively. Except for depersonalization (0.68), the internal consistencies of all variables appeared to be 0.70 or higher, which is sufficient according to Nunnally and Bernstein’s criterion (1994). The weak internal consistency of the depersonalization scale has already been found in other studies (Van Dierendonck, 1997; Brouwers & Tomic, 1998). Table 1 represents the results of the internal consistencies, the means, the standard deviations, and the correlation coefficients.

Table 1 shows the following significant correlations: Pressure of work negatively correlates with age ($p < 0.01$), social support at home positively with age ($p < 0.05$), extroversion negatively with pressure of work ($p < 0.01$); emotional stability negatively correlates with pressure of work ($p < 0.01$) and positively with age ($p < 0.01$), social support at home ($p < 0.05$) and extroversion ($p < 0.01$); emotional exhaustion correlates negatively with pressure of work ($p < 0.01$) and positively with age ($p < 0.01$), social support at home ($p < 0.05$), extroversion ($p < 0.01$) and emotional stability ($p < 0.01$); depersonalization correlates negatively with pressure of work ($p < 0.05$); depersonalization correlates positively with pressure of work ($p < 0.01$); personal accomplishment correlates positively with age, social support at home and emotional stability ($p < 0.01$); personal accomplishment correlates negatively with pressure of work and extroversion.

Male and female ministers’ scores did not always coincide. There was a difference between the two sexes in the level of social support at home: $t(414) = 3.08$, $p < 0.01$: the mean score of male ministers was 11.39 (SD = 2.95) and of female ministers 9.65 (SD = 4.50). Female and male ministers had identical scores on emotional stability: $t(413) = 1.53$, $p > 0.05$: the mean score for male ministers was 67.34 (SD = 9.29) and for female ministers 65.52 (SD = 8.44). Male and female respondents also appeared to have the same mean scores on extroversion: $t(411) = 1.59$, $p > 0.05$: the mean score for males was 61.93 (SD = 9.35), and for females 63.85 (SD = 7.95). The experience of pressure of work was also identical for the two sexes: $t(417) = 0.44$, $p > 0.05$: the mean score for males was 15.89 (SD = 5.66), for females 15.86 (SD = 5.77). Finally, male and female ministers had the same mean scores on the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion: $t(419) = 1.00$, $p > 0.05$: the mean score of males was 13.65 (SD = 6.81), the mean score of females was 14.54 (SD = 6.83); depersonalization: $t(413) = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$: the mean scores of males was 4.98 (SD = 3.05), and of females 4.96 (SD = 3.35); personal accomplishment: $t(402) = 1.15$, $p > 0.05$: the mean scores of male and female respondents were 26.68 (SD = 4.95), and 25.91 (SD = 5.22), respectively.

A hierarchical regression analysis was carried out in order to examine to what extent the degree of the dimensions of burnout could be explained from the independent variables pressure of work, social support at home, extroversion, and emotional stability. To this end the regression analysis was carried out three times—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishments (see Table 2). With each burnout dimension as a dependent variable, the control variables age and gender were first added to the regression equation (step 1),
**Table 1.** A survey of mean scores, standard deviations, reliability and correlation coefficients of the variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<td>1 Gender</td>
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<td>2 Age</td>
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<td>3 Pressure of Work</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.141**</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
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<td>4 Social Support at Home</td>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>-0.196**</td>
<td>0.102*</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
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<td>5 Extroversion</td>
<td>62.25</td>
<td>9.15</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>-0.273**</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>(0.87)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Emotional Stability</td>
<td>67.03</td>
<td>9.17</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>0.135**</td>
<td>-0.410**</td>
<td>0.118*</td>
<td>0.482**</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Emotional Exhaustion</td>
<td>13.81</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>-0.206**</td>
<td>0.571*</td>
<td>-0.130*</td>
<td>-0.414**</td>
<td>-0.640**</td>
<td>(0.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Depersonalization</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>-0.171**</td>
<td>0.320**</td>
<td>-0.076</td>
<td>-0.314**</td>
<td>-0.359**</td>
<td>0.417**</td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Personal Accomplishment</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>0.117*</td>
<td>-0.351**</td>
<td>0.139**</td>
<td>-0.463**</td>
<td>0.496**</td>
<td>-0.342**</td>
<td>-0.312**</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Cronbach’s alphas are in brackets.

Extroversion and Emotional Stability: Minimum score 1, maximum score 100.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicting Variable</th>
<th>Emotional Exhaustion</th>
<th>Depersonalization</th>
<th>Personal Accomplishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>ΔR²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.09*</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure of Work</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.11**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Stability</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.42***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-total for the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77.36***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

β is the standardized regression coefficient of the total regression equation of all variables. The increase of R² for the variables in a step is based on the F-test for the step involved.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.
followed by the independent variables social support at home, pressure of work, extroversion, and emotional stability (step 2).

On the basis of the hierarchical regression analysis the following results can be reported. First, there was a significant correlation between age and two dimensions of burnout, emotional exhaustion \((p < 0.05)\), and depersonalization \((p < 0.01)\). Second, there was a significant relation between pressure of work and emotional exhaustion \((p < 0.001)\), depersonalization \((p < 0.001)\), and personal accomplishment \((p < 0.001)\). The conclusion may be that the higher the level of pressure of work was, the higher were the levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and the lower the level of personal accomplishment. Third, there appeared to be a significant correlation between extroversion and all three dimensions of burnout \((p < 0.001)\). The higher the score was on extroversion, the lower the scores were on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and the higher on personal accomplishment. Fourth, emotional stability correlated significantly with the three dimensions of burnout \((p < 0.001)\). The higher the score was on emotional stability, the lower the scores were on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and the higher on personal accomplishment.

Other factors

The mean number of years of work experience as a minister was 18.2 (Table 3). Male ministers reported significantly more years of work experience than their female counterparts did: \(t(410) = 8.39, p < 0.001\). There was a negative correlation between the number of years of work experience and emotional exhaustion \((r = -0.45, p < 0.001)\) and depersonalization \((r = -0.12, p < 0.005)\), that is, the longer the respondent had been employed as a minister the lower the scores were on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. No correlation was found between years of work, experience, and personal accomplishment.

When we look at the mean number of years a minister has worked in his or her current congregation (the mean score was 8.3), the results showed that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Emotional Exhaustion</th>
<th>Depersonalization</th>
<th>Personal Accomplishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Years as a Minister</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>-0.45**</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Years in This Congregation</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.15**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (Vocation)</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (Attractiveness)</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction With Income</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconsider Original Choice</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>-0.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Congregation?</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>-0.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Job?</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \(p < 0.01\); ** \(p < 0.001\).
male ministers had a significantly higher mean score than female ministers $t(399) = 4.45, p < 0.001$. The correlation of this variable with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization was negative, ($r = -0.11, p < 0.005$, and $r = -0.15, p < 0.001$, respectively). There was no correlation with the mean number of years in the present congregation and personal accomplishment.

A considerable number of the respondents said they had been motivated to become a minister because they had become aware of their vocation. The mean score on this variable was 3.24, however, there was a significant difference in the scores of male and female ministers $t(421) = 3.14, p = 0.01$. No correlation was found between ‘vocation’ on the one hand and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization on the other. There was a positive correlation between ‘vocation’ and personal accomplishment: the higher the score was on ‘vocation’, the higher the score on personal accomplishment ($r = 0.18, p < 0.001$).

In respect of ‘attractiveness of the job’ as one of the main reasons to become a minister, there appeared to be a negative correlation with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.21, p < 0.001$) and a positive correlation with personal accomplishment ($r = 0.17, p < 0.001$).

The majority of the ministers are satisfied with their income (mean score 3.47). There were no significant differences between male and female ministers. Furthermore, there was a significant correlation between satisfaction with income and burnout. Higher degrees of satisfaction corresponded with lower scores on emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.25, p < 0.001$) and depersonalization ($r = -0.23, p < 0.001$), and higher scores on personal accomplishment ($r = 0.10, p < 0.005$).

If ministers were given the opportunity to take their choice again, 76% of them would not consider the choice of another profession. There appeared to be no significant differences between male and female ministers. There was a positive relation between non-consideration of the original choice and burnout: the higher the correlation between considering another choice, the higher the scores were on emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.47, p < 0.001$) and depersonalization ($r = 0.30, p < 0.001$), and the lower on personal accomplishment ($r = -0.38, p < 0.001$).

The majority of the ministers said they would not like the idea of moving to another congregation if the opportunity arose (mean score 2.08). There was no significant difference between male and female ministers. There was a positive correlation between moving to another congregation and burnout: the stronger the feeling to move to another congregation, the higher the score was on emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.21, p < 0.001$) and depersonalization ($r = 0.24, p < 0.001$), and the lower on personal accomplishment ($r = -0.14, p < 0.001$).

Five percent of the respondents indicated to consider job-turnover. Compared with male respondents, female respondents considered job-turnover significantly more seriously: $\chi^2(5) = 13.13, p < 0.05$. There was a positive correlation between the consideration of job-turnover and burnout: the more serious the consideration was, the higher the scores were on emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.42, p < 0.001$), and depersonalization ($r = 0.33, p < 0.001$), and the lower on personal accomplishment ($r = -0.25, p < 0.001$).
Ministers were also asked to report which tasks they looked upon as weighty (Table 4). Holding church services, a weekly ritual for many ministers, may put a heavy pressure on the minister’s work. Writing a sermon is considered to be one of the heaviest tasks, in view of the following statements: ‘Very nice, but it takes a lot of time’; ‘It is very heavy and difficult to have the sermon finished in time, and to find interesting subjects on the Internet to make the sermon as attractive as possible’; ‘Preparing sermons is difficult for they need to be ‘first-quality’, biblical and modern, and meaningful for the young and the old’; ‘My sermons are appreciated, but the emotional burden is enormous’.

As for the item ‘pastoral care’, the divergent expectations of the parishioners were mentioned as stressors. ‘It is very taxing to visit the parishioners, something that is very necessary, but I can not fulfil every request to do so’; ‘I do not see the need for visits’; ‘These visits are about nothing, but they do take a lot of time’.

Many ministers looked upon catechism as a heavy task, especially the transfer of religious convictions to young people. ‘It is important to strike the right note in meetings with teenagers’. A total of 10% of the ministers reported problems with the many meetings they had to attend. ‘I have a problem with meetings that play church’; ‘The number of meetings I have to attend, should be decreased, and the attendants should get schooled in “meaningful” and cooperative discussions’.

A total of 15% of the ministers had problems with the division of time among the various tasks, and the majority of them had the feeling that their work was never done. ‘The work is heavy because of the combination of too many tasks in too little time’; ‘You are always and ever expected to be available and it is difficult to circumscribe the borders of one’s spare time’; ‘It is a serious problem to combine my work as a minister with my tasks at home’; ‘It is difficult to empathize and sympathize with someone at the proper time, whereas the fixed duties (religious services, catechism) must go on’. It was also a problem for many ministers to actualize the so-called ‘Set-out-together Congregation’, which meant an increase of duties and tasks. A minister who worked in two congregations that differed much in culture and religious convictions put it this way: ‘These congregations are two islands and I am the ferry, unfortunately, because of lack of time they get the same sermon and catechism’.

Table 4. A survey of weighty tasks in percentages of the total number of reformed ministers ($n=424$). N.B. The total sum of the scores is not 100%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Services and Sermon</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral Care</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration, Management, Organization</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catechism</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings, Conferences</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ministers made the following suggestions when asked for measures that would make their work easier (Table 5). The following suggestions were made concerning the decrease of pressure of work: fewer self-imposed demands, to distance oneself more from work, to delegate more tasks, better planning and delegation of tasks, specialization, fewer but more efficient meetings, to follow a course on time-management, to separate pastoral care and administrative responsibility, to more professionally interpret the ministry, to decrease the number of religious services and sermons, to change the character of liturgy, to introduce weekend duties, to increase the possibility of part-time work, and to make nation-wide decisions more rapidly.

Administrative and secretarial support may enable the minister to spend more time on the fundamental contents of his or her job. There was much demand for a clear policy and more support from the Church Council. The Church Council should give clarity on the identity and aims of the local congregation, on what may be expected from the individual parishioners in connection with the tasks of the minister. Well-structured talks on job-evaluation should be introduced. Furthermore, suggestions were made to appoint more competent voluntary workers and to work as a team, for example a team preparing sermons and catechism. Finally, many ministers said they were in need of getting professional training, refresher courses, study leave and tutorship.

**Burnout among ministers and other human service professionals**

One of the purposes of our study was to find out whether the degree of burnout among reformed ministers might be compared with the degree of burnout among other professionals (see Table 6). Because the current study used more than one test, we adjusted the alpha level downward to consider chance capitalization (Sankoh et al., 1997; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). It appeared that the mean score on burnout among ministers in our study did not deviate from the mean score among pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church: emotional exhaustion $t(420) = 0.78$, $p > 0.05$; depersonalization $t(414) = 1.83$, $p > 0.05$; personal accomplishment $t(403) = 0.82$, $p > 0.05$.

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**Table 5. Suggestions to make work easier. Percentages of reformed ministers who made the suggestions ($n = 424$). The total is not 100%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solutions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decrease pressure of work, improve handling tasks</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More support</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More time for study, spirituality and prayer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When we compared the mean score of our respondents with other human service professionals, the following results were obtained. Our respondents scored significantly lower on emotional exhaustion than general practitioners $t(883) = 9.04, p < 0.001$, teachers $t(874) = 8.18, p < 0.001$ and nurses $t(612) = 3.29, p < 0.001$. Ministers scored significantly higher than carers for the elderly, $t(853) = 7.45, p < 0.001$.

The mean score on depersonalization of our respondents was significantly lower than the mean score of general practitioners $t(981) = 20.05, p < 0.001$, dentists $t(1040) = 4.24, p < 0.001$, teachers $t(990) = 7.80, p < 0.001$, nurses $t(737) = 10.93, p < 0.001$ and social workers of the Salvation Army $t(508) = 3.87, p < 0.001$. Ministers scored significantly higher on depersonalization than carers for the elderly, $t(894) = 6.58, p < 0.001$.

Finally, our respondents scored significantly lower on personal accomplishment than dentists $t(1004) = 12.97, p < 0.001$, physiotherapists $t(859) = 18.32, p < 0.001$, nurses $t(614) = 3.37, p < 0.001$, carers for the elderly $t(940) = 11.36, p < 0.001$ and social workers of the Salvation Army $t(561) = 2.87, p < 0.01$.

**Discussion**

Our study showed that reformed ministers in the Netherlands appear to suffer from burnout to almost the same degree as their counterparts, the pastors of the Dutch Reformed Church. When we compared ministers with other human service professionals, it appeared that ministers scored significantly lower on the three dimensions of burnout than the majority of the professionals in question. They appeared to have the same level of emotional exhaustion as dentists, physiotherapists and social workers of the Salvation Army. The ministers’ results...
did not deviate from the physiotherapists’. Our respondents had the same degree of personal accomplishment as teachers and general practitioners.

This study departed from the assumption that high pressure of work and lack of social support at home might increase the risk of becoming burnt out (Schaufeli, 1990a, b). This assumption was partly confirmed. Ministers that appeared to experience high pressure of work scored significantly higher on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and lower on personal accomplishment. No significant correlations were found between social support at home and burnout.

Second, we departed from the assumption that personality factors like extroversion and emotional stability would influence the onset of burnout. Research shows that extroversion positively correlates with personal accomplishment (Deary et al., 1996) and that individuals with high scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization show a low tendency to extroversion (Huebner & Mills, 1994). This assumption was confirmed in our study. Extrovert and emotionally stable ministers scored low on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and high on personal accomplishment.

It appeared that age correlated stronger with burnout than any other of the demographic variables. In general, earlier studies showed that younger human service professionals between 30 and 40 seem to have higher levels of burnout than professionals beyond those ages (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In our study we found similar results, that is to say that the younger the minister was, the higher the level of burnout was. Young ministers indicated that they suffer from higher levels of emotional exhaustion, and experience more pressure of work than their older counterparts.

The data on the weightiness of the various tasks of a minister almost showed the same results as the ones that were found in earlier studies. For instance, 20% of the ministers indicated that pressure of work was too high. This finding is in line with the study of Van Veldhoven and Broersen (1999) who concluded that individuals who have attended higher education experience relatively more often high pressure of work than individuals who have attended only primary or secondary education. A total of 12% of the ministers said they were in need of more social support. Van der Leest (1997) observed that the ministers’ tasks become increasingly heavier. Moreover, these tasks cannot be carried out adequately without support from others (delegation of tasks). Cooperation with colleagues and professional support become increasingly more important to keep the ministry going. Ministers also pointed at the weightiness and scope of the entire burden of tasks. Fragmentation of daily routine was considered to be a negative consequence of the diversification of tasks. Quite a few ministers could not cope with the demands the ministry requires, and felt they did not come up to the mark. Our respondents said that the relations with the Church Council were not always perfect. Many ministers had difficulty in conveying religious beliefs to teenagers. Meetings and conferences also made their tasks more arduous.

The responding ministers made some suggestions to relieve the pressure of work. From the organizational point of view, they suggested: to transfer and delegate tasks to competent volunteers, to attend fewer meetings, to decrease the
number of religious services and sermons, and to employ administrative and secretarial support. From a personal point of view, the ministers suggested that they lower their own requirements, they distance themselves more from work, and they make more time for themselves. Finally, ministers said they were in need of professional training and schooling, study leave and tutorship. They also asked for more psychological knowledge and skills when under training.

The results of our study may be a reason to introduce some preventive measures. Research has shown that personality characteristics influence the ministers’ burnout level. However, as it seems to be impossible to really change someone’s personality, it is out of the question to try to prevent burnout in this way. It may be useful to alert the ministers to the effect their personality may have on the onset and level of burnout. Especially introverted individuals appear to suffer from burnout, and they should be helped in the process of becoming aware of the relation between their personality and burnout. It might be a good idea to introduce courses on personality and burnout in the ministers’ training (Van Gael, 1998). When it comes to prevention of burnout it may be even more effective to concentrate on stressors at work that may influence the beginning and development of burnout. First, the course program of novice ministers might be changed. Perhaps more attention could be paid to an increase of a minister’s competencies: to learn how to act and organize, to pay attention to one’s own performance in an organization and to use time-management. The findings that ministers had significantly lower scores on personal accomplishment than other human service professionals may be due to deficiencies in the curriculum of ministers in training. Coaching young ministers might be viewed as another precautionary measure. Tutors, for example an older minister, should be appointed to help the new ministers. Special stress prevention programs have been developed with respect to teachers: it might be a good idea to adapt these programs to the needs of ministers. Furthermore, the Church Council should pay more attention to acquire knowledge on how to recognize burnout among ministers. Recognition of the burnout problem is a condition sine qua non in the approach of the syndrome (Evers et al., 2000).

Our study suffers from some limitations. When we examined the correlation between two personality factors and burnout, we did not take other personality factors into consideration that might have played a role in the onset of burnout. Wagenvoort et al. (1998) already stated that personality factors decided the nature of someone’s coping strategies. These strategies are believed to be responsible for the prospective level of burnout. It might also be possible that ‘locus of control’ and expectations play a role in the correlation between personality and burnout. We recommend examining how personality factors that may be responsible for the development of burnout influence each other. Moreover, the examination of coping, personality, expectations, and locus of control might reveal the interaction of these variables together with their influence on the burnout process. This recommendation also applies to stressors in the workplace. For that matter, we only examined the role of two stressors in the workplace, whereas many more are mentioned in the literature. Some ministers commented on
several items of our questionnaire, especially item 29 from the MBI—I think I can solve my parishioners’ problems adequately—since ministers do not consider themselves to be responsible for solving problems of their parishioners. Items 2, 3, 8 and 10 that measured social support at home do not do justice to single ministers. These items take the presence of a partner for granted, whereas 38% reported to be single. We recommend re-phrasing these items in follow-up studies.

Several ministers commented on the time the questionnaires took to be filled out. We sent out our questionnaires in August, since this month is known for its quietness with respect to ministerial duties, so in most cases pressure of work is less and the holidays create a boost in mental fitness. Had we sent our questionnaires in November or in March, the results might have been less positive.

In conclusion it may be said that our study provides us with some useful information on the correlation between age, pressure of work, social support at home, extroversion, and emotional stability and the level of burnout among a particular category of human service professionals, namely ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church. We also recommended future study on the same subject in which the ministers’ coping style should be incorporated as a mediating variable.

References


