

# Do Personality Characteristics Constitute the Profile of Burnout-Prone Correctional Officers?

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## Abstract

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**AIM:** This study examined the relationship between personality characteristics and burnout syndrome among Bulgarian correctional officers.

**METHODS:** The cross-sectional study took place through individual, voluntary and anonymous interviewing of 307 employees from three district prisons. Maslach burnout inventory, Eysenck personality questionnaire and demographic characteristics were administered.

**RESULTS:** The personality predictors of emotional exhaustion were low emotional stability and low level of dimension extraversion. The predictors of depersonalization were high levels of neuroticism and psychoticism and low level of extraversion.

**CONCLUSION:** This research helps to identify employees who are at risk for developing burnout as a result of their personalities. In Bulgaria, there is still no official information about studies in this area.

## Introduction

Employees of prisons, for their job nature and work environment, are exposed to high levels of occupational stress [1] [2]. Armstrong and Griffin [3] contend that "very few other institutions are charged with the central task of supervising and securing an unwilling and potentially violent population". Researchers have found that the perceived dangerousness of the job, as a result of threats and inmate violence is a significant cause of stress for much correctional staff.

Over time, these prolonged or chronic stressors in the workplace can lead to strain and

ultimately to burnout among many prison staff [4] [5] [6].

Over the last years, researchers focus on the issue of job burnout among prison staff in various ways. Some authors study correctional officers in general [6] [7] [8], others focus on the relationship between personality variables and burnout [9], gender difference in stress and burnout [10], impact of correctional officer job stress and burnout [2] [11], relationship between supervisor and management trust and job burnout among correctional staff [12].

The limited study of burnout in the field of corrections has found that this is a serious problem for many officers and other prison staff, and one that needs more scientific attention [7] [13]. Cieslak et al.,

[14] contend that correctional staff burnout is less frequently studied than burnout of teachers or medical personnel, particularly regarding identifying and understanding its potential causes. Neveu [13] indicates that he has found only 16 published studies on correctional staff burnout and not all of these explore possible causes of burnout.

There is currently a paucity of research that examines personality characteristics and their association with employee burnout within correctional officer samples. During the last two decades, quite a few studies have indicated the possibility that personality plays an important role in the development of burnout. In Bulgaria, there is still no official information about studies in this area. Correctional officers are a little studied professional group that works in totally closed institutions that are difficult to access for investigations. To date, the psychological support offered in Bulgarian prisons is commonly directed to inmates. Thus, the present research will help us to identify employees of penalty system who are at risk for developing burnout as a result of their personalities. This dataset offers an opportunity to gain new insight into Bulgarian corrections and Bulgarian correctional officers.

This study aimed to examine the relationship between personality characteristics and burnout syndrome among correctional officers. The focus was to investigate if personality characteristics constitute the profile of burnout-prone prison staff.

## Methods

There are twelve prisons in Bulgaria of which eleven are for male inmates, and only one is for women. The prisons in Plovdiv and Pazardzhik for male inmates encompass the building of the prisons itself and four open type correctional dormitories. The Plovdiv District Prison is the second largest prison in Bulgaria. The Pazardzhik District Prison is mainly for recidivists convicted of major crimes. Working there involves high-risk work with hostile individuals, high crime rates and the size of the community, a high incidence of physical ailments and psychological problems that affect their work performance. In Bulgaria, there is only one prison for women and one correctional dormitory for minor girls, both located in Sliven. The staff of the prisons and the affiliated dormitories is distributed in the following divisions: custodial work and guarding activities, social activities and educational work, financial division, human resources and medical centre.

A cross-sectional study was carried out with 307 correctional officers working at three prisons in Bulgaria. The all available staff at prisons in the Plovdiv District Prison (N = 106), the Pazardzhik

District Prison (N = 100) and the Sliven District Prison (N = 101) were surveyed. Given that the data come from three prisons comprising 25% of all prisons in Bulgaria, the sample selected was considered representative of the Bulgarian prison system context.

To conduct the survey, we received a statement of approval and permit for admission to the respective prisons from the General Directorate "Execution of Penalties" (GDEP) at the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice (with Reg. No. 11518/22.12.2011).

The participation of the prison employees was voluntary without any financial compensation. The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter in which the goal of the study was briefly introduced, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the answers were emphasised. Data were collected between June 2012 and April 2014. The only qualification in the sample selection was that the employee has direct contact with inmates. The exclusion criteria included an unwillingness to cooperate and incorrect completion of the questionnaire. Some staff members were off duty (e.g., sick leave, vacation or administrative leave) during the period of the survey. The response rate was 85.28%.

Six demographic characteristics were selected. Gender was coded as female = 0 and male = 1. Age was measured in continuous years. Marital status was divided into married, unmarried, divorced, and widowed. Education was measured as a dichotomous variable representing whether the respondent had a university degree or not. Tenure was measured as the number of years the respondent had worked at the prison. Job position was measured as a dichotomous variable representing whether the respondent was a correctional officer or inspector (supervisory officer).

The most widely used and validated instrument for the measure of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson [15]. The Bulgarian version of the MBI adapted for the Bulgarian population by B. Tzenova [16] was used to measure the three core dimensions of burnout – emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion (representing a lack of energy and feelings of being over-extended and depleted of emotional and physical resources; the basic stress component of burnout) was measured using nine items. Depersonalization (representing feelings of detachment and unresponsiveness about the job; the depersonalization aspect of burnout) was measured using five items. Finally, personal accomplishment (feelings of incompetence, a reduced ability to do the job, and lack of accomplishment; the self-evaluation dimension of burnout) was measured using eight items. The items of personal accomplishment were reverse scored (lack of professional efficiency). The response choices, rated on a 7-point frequency scale, were never (0), few times in year (1), once a month or

less (2), few times in a month (3), once a week (4), few times a week (5), every day (6). High scores on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and low scores on personal accomplishment were indicative of burnout.

The Bulgarian version of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) was used to assess the personality traits of a person [17]. The questionnaire contains 86 items and answers are given on a Yes-No scale with regards to whether respondents agree or disagree with the given statement. Eysenck initially conceptualises personality as two, biologically-based independent dimensions of temperament measured on a continuum:

1. *Extraversion-Introversion:* Extraverts, according to Eysenck's theory, are chronically under-aroused and bored and are therefore in need of external stimulation to bring them up to an optimal level of performance. Introverts, on the other hand, are chronically over-aroused and jittery and are therefore in need of peace to bring them up to an optimal level of performance. Most people fall in the midrange of the extraversion-introversion continuum; an area referred to as ambiversion.

2. *Neuroticism-Stability:* Neuroticism or emotionality is characterised by high levels of negative affect such as depression and anxiety. According to Eysenck's theory neurotic people who experience negative affect (fight-or-flight) in the face of minor stressors, are easily nervous or upset. Emotionally stable people who experience negative affect only in the face of very major stressors, are calm and collected under pressure.

Further research demonstrates the need for a third category of temperament:

3. *Psychoticism-Socialization:* Psychoticism is associated not only with the liability to have a psychotic episode (or break with reality) but also with aggression. Psychotic behaviour is rooted in the characteristics of tough-mindedness, non-conformity, inconsideration, recklessness, hostility, anger and impulsiveness.

EPQ assesses three basic personality dimensions-extraversion-introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, and, additionally, the tendency to provide socially desirable answers-the lie scale.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 17.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) was used for the statistical analysis. A descriptive analysis was conducted on the sample (the results were presented as mean  $\pm$  SEM). A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to explore the relationship between burnout subscales and personality traits. A multiple linear regression analysis with burnout subscales was used to examine the impact of personality characteristics. The emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment were the three dependent variables.

The main independent variables in this study were personality characteristics. These were taken as predictors to determine whether introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism made significant independent contributions to the three dimensions of burnout. A p-value  $< 0.05$  was considered as statistically significant level. All p-values were two-tailed.

## Results

Concerning the demographic description of the sample, the mean age of participants was  $40.59 \pm 0.48$  years, of which 68.02% ( $n = 209$ ) were male. Of the total number, 237 officers (77.20%) were married, 124 (40.39%) had a university education, 79 (25.73%) were inspectors, and the mean number of years of service at the prison was  $11.37 \pm 0.44$ .

The three personality dimensions were significantly correlated with burnout subscales (Table 1). The strongest correlation was between neuroticism and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and negatively correlated with personal accomplishment. Low values of extraversion correlated strongly with low scores of personal accomplishment, and with high scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Dimension psychoticism was positively correlated with high values of depersonalization.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlations between Personality Variables and Burnout Subscales**

MBI Subscales Personality	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Extraversion	-0.45**	-0.41**	0.55**
Neuroticism	0.76**	0.59**	-0.49**
Psychoticism	0.35*	0.56**	-0.34*

Note. \*p-value  $\leq .05$ . \*\*p-value  $\leq .01$  (two-tailed).

A series of analyses were performed using multiple linear regression (using the Enter method) to identify the predictors of the MBI scales. For every single dependent variable, we developed an independent regression model. First, we conducted a linear regression analysis with the personality variables as the predictors and emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable (Table 2). The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 0.391, which means about 40% of the variance in emotional exhaustion was explained by the variance of high levels of neuroticism and low levels of extraversion. The high level of neuroticism was the factor that had the most significant influence on emotional exhaustion.

In a second regression analysis, we regressed depersonalization on the independent variables. The personality traits neuroticism, psychoticism and extroversion, explained 38% of the variance in depersonalization (see values in the

second column in Table 2).

**Table 2: Effects of Personality Traits on Burnout among Bulgarian Correctional Officers**

Independent Variable	Emotional Exhaustion		Depersonalization	
	B	$\beta$	B	$\beta$
Extroversion	-0.205	-0.096	-0.209	-0.134**
Neuroticism	1.106	0.575**	0.717	0.514**
Psychoticism	0.448	0.089	0.780	0.212**
R <sup>2</sup>		0.391**		0.388**

Note. N=307. \*p-value  $\leq$  .05. \*\*p-value  $\leq$  .01.

We performed the third regression analysis using personal accomplishment as the dependent variable. No significant relations were found with personality traits. All variables that had a statistical significance level of  $p > 0.05$  were excluded from the model.

Summary of the multiple linear regression model determined that the important statistically significant predictors of emotional exhaustion were a low level of dimension extraversion and low emotional stability. Depersonalization was best predicted by low level of extraversion, high levels of neuroticism and psychoticism.

## Discussion

All the previous researchers reported that prison environment affects emotional well-being of the prison staff, which in turn brings about increased stress among them and culminates into job burnout among many prison staff [1] [6] [18]. In our previous study, we have revealed that the Bulgarian prison employees do suffer from burnout [19]. Based on Maslach's categorisation of burnout 10.42%, 25.73% and 50.49% of our respondents experience high levels of job burnout in the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment subscales, respectively. This result is in line with other previous studies on similar populations [6] [20].

Undoubtedly correctional work is a high-risk occupation for developing burnout. Lambert et al., [21], in a review of 55 published studies on burnout, conclude that various workplace stressors play a role in leading to correctional staff burnout. But what factors contribute to burnout? Why do some employees report high levels of burnout whereas others in the same environment do not? Personality characteristics are important in explaining burnout among correctional officers. The theories of personality suggest that individuals' dispositions affect their interpretations of and reactions to their environments. The risk of burnout may differ not only across situations but also across individuals. The three personality factors that constitute the basic structure of personality in Eysenck's system are most

important in determining how individuals experience and adjust to the stressful events in their lives. In our study, the application of the Eysenck personality inventory shows that introversion has the strong effect on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Our results are consistent with the findings of similar studies in the field [22]. The workers higher in positive affectivity (a component of extraversion) experience less burnout [23] [24].

Neuroticism, introversion and psychoticism appear to be the most consistent predictors of burnout. A tendency to underestimate self-performance and a tendency to react with strong emotions and self-criticism in stressful situations seem to be associated with a higher vulnerability to all symptoms of burnout [25] [26]. We find that correctional officers who are higher in neuroticism experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. These findings resonate with another recent study among a sample of UK prison officers, in which higher neuroticism emerges as a risk factor for burnout [27].

Schaufeli and Enzmann [28], in a comprehensive review of more than 250 studies on burnout, reported that neuroticism is one of the strongest personality correlates of burnout. For instance, when exposed to high job demands employees with high levels of neuroticism are more prone to burnout than those with lower levels [29]. According to Eysenck and Eysenck [30], individuals who score high on neuroticism are prone to emotional, anxious and fearful responses, and these disproportionately pronounced feelings of distress may lead to emotional exhaustion. Thus more neurotic individuals combined with low extraversion perceive a given work environment as more stressful compared to less neurotic individuals [31].

Psychoticism is positively associated with depersonalization. Some authors see depersonalization as a coping strategy in itself, rather than as a manifestation of burnout. Hobfoll and Freedy [32] expect psychoticism to affect depersonalization directly, rather than through coping strategies.

Although conditions in the work environment contribute to burnout, our findings suggest that burnout is also associated with employee personality. Personality traits are considered to be rather stable and unchangeable throughout life, and difficult to modify directly. Personality characteristics may predict which employees experience increases, decreases, or constant levels of burnout over time. Personality types may also be used as indicators for individuals in need of support in the workplace.

In closing, emotional exhaustion is predicted by low levels of extraversion and high levels of neuroticism. Depersonalization is predicted by low levels of extraversion and high levels of neuroticism and psychoticism. Thus, correctional officers who are

high in neuroticism and low in extraversion deserve special attention and need to benefit from training programs in preventing and reducing burnout.

**Limitations:** This article is a part of a large study on burnout among prison employees in Bulgaria. It should be noted that the results presented in this article were from only one study and longitudinal studies should be undertaken in future to confirm the conclusions obtained in this study.

Future studies need to research the impact of different job and organisational characteristics on correctional staff burnout. Our next step is to offer some detailed coping strategies to decrease job burnout among correctional officers. We hope that preventive care to the mental health of correctional officers benefits not only the prison staff but also their families and the inmates also.

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