

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3 argues that the role identities of client service employees carry implications for the development of burnout. According to the conceptual framework, role identities of client service employees are derived from, and partly shaped by, the dominant client discourse of the organisation. These role identities, which contain role-related expectations, influence role-related behaviour and subjective perceptions in a number of ways. In cases where this role-related behaviour results in role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity or emotional labour, it could result in burnout. Furthermore, role identities can inform subjective perceptions of the work environment. If these perceptions include feelings of inequity, a loss of autonomy or a sense of failure, burnout could result. The present study also proposes that processes related to failed self-verification could contribute to the development of burnout. If individuals are unable to positively affirm a role identity through the processes of self-verification, they could suffer a diminished sense of self and a loss of efficacy – both of these being recognised antecedents to burnout.

In the remainder of this chapter, the qualitative and quantitative results are interpreted using the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3. In so doing, each of the research questions posed in Chapter 3 are addressed. It should be noted that all research questions pertaining to the relationship between burnout and role identity are discussed first, after which they are integrated using the conceptual model developed in Chapter 3. The research questions pertaining to the relationship between role identity and discourse are dealt with after this in a separate section.

7.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

7.2.1 Research Question 1: To what extent are client service employees' burnout levels related to their biographic and demographic characteristics?

Previous research on the antecedents to burnout has shown relationships between burnout and a number of biographical and demographic variables. While the primary objective of the present research is to explore whether a relationship between burnout and role identity exists, a selection of biographic and demographic variables were included in the questionnaire. This was done with the purpose of controlling for external variance and to enrich interpretation of possible relationships between burnout and role identity. To this end, a number of noteworthy relationships were found between burnout and biographical and demographic variables.

Prior to discussing these relationships, it is appropriate to introduce a cautionary note regarding the interaction effects and causal relationships between role identity, burnout and the above-mentioned variables. Given the nature of the present research, the interaction between role identity, burnout, demographic/biographic characteristics and orientation to work, organisation and life is unclear. While previous research confirms many of the significant relationships found between burnout and demographic/biographic characteristics in the present study, it remains unclear as to the causal direction of the relationships. It is also unclear as to whether any of these variables could potentially mediate the relationship between role identity and burnout. It also remains uncertain as to whether role identity is a consequence of, or antecedent to, any of these variables. In the paragraphs that follow, the significant relationships between burnout, demographic/biographic characteristics and orientation to life, work and organisation will be discussed. Where applicable, speculations will be made regarding the possible interaction effects and causal relationships between these variables.

Gender (V83), marital status (V84), age (V82), tenure at current organisation (V86) and hours worked per week (V89) do not display significant relationships with burnout total, personal accomplishment or emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation.

Participating organisation (V106), population group (V105), educational level (V85), total working years (V88) and years working in a service environment (V87) all display significant associations with burnout or either of its components, and will be discussed below.

Firstly, the company to which the client service employee belongs (participating organisation) displays a significant relationship with burnout total, reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. Respondents from Company M display statistically significantly higher mean scores on reduced personal accomplishment when compared with respondents from Company F and Company T. Respondents from Company F, on the other hand, display significantly higher mean scores on the emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation subscale than respondents from Company T. This finding is important because it suggests that in the present sample, the development of burnout is associated with the organisation to which respondents belong. It could also mean that the development of burnout is associated with the kind of service work one is engaged in. Since a number of the antecedents to burnout are organisational, different companies with different organisational practices and policies would influence the development of burnout differently. While role identity is not regarded as an organisational variable, it is acknowledged that the organisational client discourse would shape the identities constructed by its employees. In the case of Company M, for instance, it could be speculated that the client discourse shapes the construction of role identities that possibly obstruct the experience of personal accomplishment. In the case of Company F, the role identities shaped in response to the organisational client discourse may facilitate the development of emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. Caution should therefore be exercised when interpreting the relationships between burnout and respondent scores on the adjective pairs used to describe the client and the self in role.

Since each of the three companies under investigation represents different service sectors, the type of service work required on the part of the client service employee is markedly different. Furthermore, the type of client serviced by each of the companies is also markedly different. Client service employees from Company F, for instance, engage with clients processing insurance claims. These clients are generally in a

position of need and may come across as emotionally vulnerable. From the qualitative interviews conducted with higher burnout employees from Company F, it is evident that these employees engage in a considerable amount of emotional labour. They are “taught” how to relate to the client appropriately, suggesting a strong propensity for surface acting, but also tend to emphasise and identify with the client’s problems – suggestive of deep acting. Client service employees from Company T also engage with clients who are in need of assistance, but these clients are not emotionally vulnerable because of this need. Client service employees from this organisation display evidence of engaging in surface acting with the client, insofar as hiding irritation and making the client feel comfortable. While it has been suggested the deep acting is negatively associated with depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), research also suggests that emotional labour which does not result in favourable client relationships or verification of the self, could result in the development of burnout (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). This may be the case in Company F. While these employees engage in both surface and deep acting, they are unable to establish favourable relationships and often feel guilt for not helping as much as they could. While it would have been appropriate to control for company effect during the quantitative analysis of the data, the small sample size rendered this impractical. Results from the qualitative phase of the research show, however, that higher burnout employees from different companies exhibit similar role identity characteristics. This appears to suggest that while the client service context may be vastly different, the nature of the role identities are similar across the higher burnout group.

Population group also displays a significant association with experienced burnout in the present sample. White respondents present significantly higher levels of personal accomplishment than their black, coloured and indian counterparts. No previous research conducted in South Africa could be found to support or contradict this finding. Since only 25 respondents in the present sample are not part of the white population group, further research is needed to determine whether population group does indeed have a significant influence on burnout scores.

Respondents who have been working in a client service environment for longer display lower levels of burnout and reduced personal accomplishment when

compared with those that have less client service experience. Similarly, employees who have been working for a longer period of time, also display lower levels of burnout when compared with those working for shorter. Previous research into the antecedents of burnout has shown how work-related expectations become more realistic the more experience the individual has in the working environment, resulting in increased levels of personal accomplishment (Kuruuzum *et al.*, 2008). Since unrealistic expectations have been linked to the development of burnout (Brill, 1984; Cherniss, 1980; Freudemberger & Richelson, 1980), longer serving employees with more realistic expectations would experience more accomplishment and therefore less burnout. Furthermore, from a role identity perspective, failure to self-verify occurs when an individual is not able to match behavioural outcomes with behavioural expectations. Individuals with limited working experience in a client service setting may therefore construct role identities based on unrealistic expectations and, as a consequence, experience diminished levels of personal accomplishment.

Educational levels display a significant positive relationship with reduced personal accomplishment. Scheffe's test indicates a pair wise statistically significant difference between the reduced personal accomplishment scores of respondents with a degree or postgraduate degree and respondents with a diploma or secondary school education. In other words, respondents with a degree or postgraduate degree display higher levels of reduced personal accomplishment than respondents with a diploma or secondary education. This association can be explained with reference to levels of expectations. Individuals with higher levels of education tend to have higher (and possibly less-realistic) expectations of what they are able to achieve when compared with individuals with lower levels of education (Pines & Maslach, 1978). Since unrealistic expectations are associated with the development of burnout, more highly educated individuals would experience higher levels of burnout.

The findings of this study show that burnout is associated with a number of demographic and biographic variables. The service organisation for which the respondent works displays a significant relationship with burnout and both its components, suggesting that service setting is a predictor of burnout. Length of

service and educational levels are also negatively associated with reduced personal accomplishment, pointing to the role of expectations in the development of burnout.

7.2.2 Research Question 2: To what extent are client service employees' burnout levels associated with their orientation towards life, work and organisation?

Results from a Spearman Correlation Analysis show that the importance placed on work (V94) and service to others (V95) is significantly negatively related to burnout total, reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. This implies that the more important client service employees regard work and service to others, the lower their levels of burnout, reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. In accordance with research conducted by Brotheridge and Lee (2002), the importance of work and service to others could be an indication of the extent to which the individual employee identifies with the client service role. Employees that regard work and service to others as important are identifying strongly with the client service role and hence experiencing lower levels of burnout. This finding corresponds with the proposition by Brotheridge and Lee (2002: 60) that individuals who identify with their roles are likely to feel authentic and cope better with work-related demands than individuals that do not identify with their roles. Individuals who regard work and service to others as important are likely to approach their work with energy, involvement and efficacy, resulting in job engagement – the opposite of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). It could further be speculated that client service employees that regard work and service to others as important and worthwhile are likely to experience efficacy and pride in themselves. Those that do not regard work and service to others as important may construct role identities that position themselves as powerless and lacking influence in the client service relationship. As a consequence, they could experience reduced feelings of personal accomplishment and a sense of defeat. This possibility is supported by Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) Wellbeing at Work Model, which suggests that people are less likely to experience burnout if they are engaged in work that they deem important and pleasurable. It also coincides with the existential perspective on burnout which is premised on the notion that people need to believe that what they

do is meaningful, important and significant in order to buffer the development of burnout (Pines, 2002).

It could also be argued that orientation towards work and service to others is a consequence of burnout rather than an antecedent to burnout. Higher burnout respondents may regard work and service to others as less important than their lower burnout colleagues do because they have depersonalised the work and service context. In such an instance, decreasing importance is placed on work and service to others as a consequence of burnout, since withdrawal from work is regarded as a mechanism by which individuals cope with excessive emotional exhaustion (Cherniss, 1993).

Satisfaction with supervisor relationships (V97) displays a significant negative relationship with emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. Higher levels of emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation are associated with less satisfactory relationships with supervisors. Data from the qualitative interviews also indicates that higher burnout respondents are dissatisfied with the relationships they have with supervisors and managers. The reasons given are numerous. A number of higher burnout employees feel that they are not provided with enough resources in order to ensure excellent client service. They report being humiliated by management and are afraid of sanctions imposed by management should they break company policy to assist the client. Many higher burnout respondents also reported feeling unable to express themselves and their concerns regarding the client. These findings are supported by previous research that shows how perceived social support plays a role in buffering the development of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 1996). Social support, which would include supervisory support, is a job resource that enables individuals to cope with excessive job demands (Kuruuzum *et al.*, 2008). Interestingly, however, satisfaction with co-worker and subordinate relationships did not display significant relationships with either of the burnout components.

Pride in the organisation (V101, V103) and loyalty and commitment to the organisation (V100, V102, V104) also display significant relationships with burnout total, personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation. This indicates that the more proud individuals are of their organisations and the more loyal

and committed they are to their organisations, the lower their levels of burnout. Again, the interaction between role identity and burnout with orientation towards the organisation is not addressed by the present research. This renders it difficult to ascertain whether levels of organisational pride, loyalty and commitment would play a role in the construction of the client service role identity, or whether role identity would influence levels of organisational pride, loyalty and commitment. It could be speculated that employees who are proud, loyal and committed to their organisations would experience a greater sense of pride and meaning in their work, resulting in reduced levels of burnout (Pines, 2002). Such a sentiment resonates with the findings by Buunk *et al.* (2007) that claim that burnout is linked to feelings of shame and inferiority. It could therefore be argued that if employees are not proud of the organisations for which they work, they could experience feelings of inferiority and shame, resulting in burnout. Data from the interviews of the present research shows that higher burnout employees report feeling let down by their organisations who appear not to provide them with enough resources and support.

Burnout has been linked to withdrawal behaviours including reduced organisational commitment (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). The fact that respondents with higher levels of burnout report lower levels of commitment and pride in their organisations, could be explained by the fact that withdrawal behaviours are an observed consequence of burnout.

The findings of this study show that burnout levels among client service employees are associated with orientations towards work and the organisation. Higher burnout respondents regard work and service to others as less important than lower burnout respondents do. They report being less satisfied with both supervisor and client relationships when compared with lower burnout respondents and experience less commitment to and pride in their employing organisations.

7.2.3 Research Question 3: In what ways do the role identities of higher burnout employees differ from the role identities of lower burnout employees?

In order to address this research question, it was necessary to determine how client service employees describe/define the client; how they describe themselves (self in role); and how they describe themselves in relation to the client (difference between descriptions of the self in role and descriptions of the client). The role-related expectations contained within the role identity (identity standard) were also explored.

7.2.3.1 Descriptions of the client

Spearman correlation analyses of the relationship between burnout and employee descriptions of the client on the set of adjective pairs indicates that higher burnout client service employees describe the client as more impatient, inconsiderate and rigid than lower burnout client service employees do. Lower levels of reduced personal accomplishment are associated with describing the client as more important and more respected, while lower levels of emotional exhaustion are associated with describing the client as understanding. Lower burnout respondents also display higher levels of satisfaction with the relationships they have built with the client when compared with higher burnout respondents.

Data from the interviews confirms this finding that higher burnout respondents differ from lower burnout respondents in their descriptions of the client. While both higher and lower burnout respondents view the client as demanding, higher burnout employees describe the client as having unreasonable expectations. Higher burnout respondents also describe the client in a negative light, often citing the client as abusive, domineering, dictatorial and controlling. Lower burnout respondents, on the other hand, recognise that the client is demanding, but do not perceive client demands as unreasonable. They generally displayed positive feelings towards the client, describing the client as trusting, respectful and appreciative.

While both the quantitative and qualitative results suggest that lower burnout respondents perceive the client in a more positive light than the higher burnout

respondents do, it is surprising to note that higher burnout respondents regard the client as less respected and less important than lower burnout respondents do. Since higher burnout respondents describe themselves as subordinate to the client, one would have expected that they perceive the client as more important and more respected than their lower burnout counterparts do. It should be noted, however, that the adjective pairs were rated on a scale of one to seven and that over 80 percent of respondents rated the client on the important side of the scale. This clearly indicates that higher burnout respondents do not necessarily view the client as unimportant and not respected, but that they merely regard the client as less important and less respected than the lower burnout respondent do.

While higher burnout respondents may regard the client as less important and less respected than lower burnout respondents do, higher burnout respondents perceive themselves as powerless against the client and subordinate to the client. It is therefore important to make a distinction between perceptions of the client (counter-role) and perceptions of the self (self in role). A client service employee may, for instance regard the client as unimportant or not respected, but if they do not perceive themselves as important or respected, the view of the client may become secondary, while the perception of the self can influence role-related behaviour instead. This finding is important in the context of the current study. According to Burke and Tully (1977) the identity of an individual only has meaning insofar it is related to a relevant counter-identity. The Burke-Tully technique therefore includes the measure of counter-identity as a variable to consider when defining a particular role identity in question. While the present research did not make use of the Burke-Tully (1977) analysis technique as it was intended, it is important to note that descriptions of the client displayed less significant correlations with burnout and its components than descriptions of the self did. This suggests that descriptions of the self may be better predictors of burnout levels than descriptions of the counter-identity are.

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3 proposes role identity as a possible antecedent to the development of burnout. The negative descriptions of the client by higher burnout respondents could however, be a consequence of burnout rather than a component of the employee's role identity. As cautioned by Maslach and Leiter (1996) a large percentage of burnout research is subject to causal

limitations. Since burnout has been linked to the development of negative work-related attitudes (Cherniss, 1980; Pines & Aronson, 1988; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) the negative sentiments expressed by higher burnout respondents towards the client may be a consequence of burnout, rather than an antecedent to the development of burnout. However, in the present study, the direction of causality can be inferred from the qualitative data. As shown in subsequent sections of this chapter, the role identities of client service employees have direct implications for role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions, which in turn, influence the self-verification process and ultimately induce or inhibit the development of burnout.

7.2.3.2 Descriptions of the self in role

Results from the Spearman correlation analysis of the relationship between burnout and client service employee descriptions of themselves, in the client service role on the list of adjectives, indicate that levels of burnout are associated with a number of self descriptions. Respondents scoring higher on burnout total, reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation describe themselves as weaker than lower burnout respondents do. Respondents with higher burnout total and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation scores also describe themselves as less respected, more unappreciated and more rigid than those respondents with lower scores on these components do. Furthermore, higher scores on the reduced personal accomplishment scale are associated with descriptions of the self as feeling more passive, while higher scores on both the emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment scales are associated with feelings of being more powerless.

These findings are supported with data from the interviews, where higher burnout respondents describe themselves as subordinate to the client and report experiencing a sense of defeat and inferiority when dealing with the client. Lower burnout employees, on the other hand, describe themselves as superior to and more knowledgeable than the client. They perceive themselves as the experts and experience a high degree of self-efficacy when engaging with the client. These findings confirm the results of research conducted by Buunk *et al.* (2007) which concluded that being placed in an unwanted and subordinate position would result in

a number of social stresses such as powerlessness, shame, a loss of status and feelings of inferiority.

7.2.3.3 Descriptions of the self in relation to the client

Spearman correlation analysis of the relationship between perceived difference between the client and client service employee on the set of adjectives and burnout yielded an interesting and noteworthy finding in the context of the present research. According to the data, levels of reduced personal accomplishment appear lower in cases where the client service employee perceives a greater difference between themselves and the client on the active–passive; powerful–powerless; considerate–inconsiderate; understanding–not understanding and patient–impatient adjective pairs. The only adjective pair where a larger perceived difference between the client and the respondent resulted in increased levels of burnout total and reduced personal accomplishment was the weak–strong continuum. This suggests that a differentiation between the client service employee and the client role identity in certain aspects is necessary to increase experienced personal accomplishment.

7.2.3.4 Role-related expectations

Role identities encompass a set of role-related expectations that guide role-related behaviour (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). These role-related expectations are derived from the identity standard of the role identity, and are therefore personal role-related expectations held by the individual.

Data from the interviews suggest that the role-related expectations of higher burnout employees differ from the role-related expectations of lower burnout employees. In the case of higher burnout respondents, the subordinated role identity appears to carry specific behavioural expectations that are different from the expectations contained within the role identities of lower burnout respondents. It appears as though higher burnout employees internalise the organisational expectation that they assist the client no matter what. This is evidenced by the fact that higher burnout employees will often go above and beyond the call of duty to assist the client. In

many instances, higher burnout employees will break company policy and procedure in order to address the client's demands. While lower burnout employees also aim to provide excellent client service, they are able to distance themselves from the client service role, and do not display evidence of breaking with company policy or procedure. According to Singh (2000) and Chung and Schneider (2002) client service employees suffer considerable stress because they are often expected to satisfy both the client and their employers. This results in considerable role conflict, characterised by incompatibility between the various expectations associated with a single role, as the needs of the client may clash with company policy and procedure. This role conflict was evident among the higher burnout employees that participated in the interviews. While they are in most instances prepared to break company policy in order to assist the client, they are also very aware that they could be punished by the employing organisation for doing so. Lower burnout respondents do not appear to display such role conflict. Many were able to distance themselves from the role, and were able to report an unreasonable client to management or co-workers.

Qualitative demands such as role conflict have been linked to burnout on numerous occasions (Low *et al.*, 2001; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Singh *et al.*, 1994) and the present study is no exception.

Because lower burnout respondents describe themselves as superior to and more knowledgeable than the client, they expect co-operation and respect from the client. This expectation seems to have facilitated the development of a partnership with the client among the lower burnout respondents. By referring to the client service relationship as a partnership, lower burnout respondents create a culture of reciprocity between themselves and the client. This sense of reciprocity appears to inhibit the development of burnout amongst these respondents in that it implies that the client carry some responsibility for the outcome of the service relationship. This finding is congruent with research by Truchot and Deregard (2001) and Bakker *et al.* (2000) which suggests that perceived reciprocity in the client/service provider relationship is a significant buffer against the development of burnout.

The findings of the research clearly suggest that the role identities of respondents on the higher end of the burnout spectrum differ from the role identities of respondents

on the lower end of the burnout spectrum. Levels of burnout are significantly associated with both client and self in role descriptions on a number of the bipolar adjective pairs, suggesting that role identity and burnout are related.

7.2.4 Research Question 4: To what extent do the role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions of higher burnout employees differ from the role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions of lower burnout employees?

Research question four investigates the extent to which the role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions of higher burnout respondents differ from the role-related behaviours and perceptions of lower burnout respondents and is answered with reference to the qualitative research only. While it is acknowledged that subjective perceptions and role-related behaviours are conceptually distinct, it is necessary to incorporate them into the same research question. As will be shown in the paragraphs below, role-related perceptions and behaviours are closely related, rendering it difficult to discuss them separately.

Data from the qualitative phase of the research suggest that the role-related behaviours of higher burnout employees differ from the role-related behaviours of lower burnout employees. While both higher and lower burnout client service employees engage in emotional labour, higher burnout employees do so to a far greater extent than their lower burnout counterparts. Lower burnout employees appear to engage in surface acting, where the displays of emotion are not actually felt or internalised. Higher burnout respondents, on the other hand, appear to engage in both surface and deep acting, since they appear to identify with and empathise with the client on a number of occasions. This finding seems somewhat contradictory to previous findings by Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) who maintain that deep acting is positively associated with feelings of personal accomplishment, while surface acting is positively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. They also maintain that deep acting is more likely when employees receive social support from colleagues and supervisors. In the context of the present research, it appears that deep acting may be associated with higher burnout, and that higher burnout employees experience less social support. These

findings should be interpreted with caution, since evidence of emotional labour in the present sample was not measured quantitatively. The distinction between deep and surface acting in the present research is drawn from limited qualitative observations and interpretations drawn from these observations and are merely inferred.

According to Tracy (2005) emotional labour is regarded as less stressful to the employee if it is viewed as part of a “strategic exchange”. Since lower burnout respondents included in the present research aim to establish a partnership with the client based on mutual respect and co-operation, it could be argued that the display of emotion is viewed as part of a strategic exchange. In such a context, the role identity of the lower burnout respondent appears to moderate the negative consequences of emotional labour in the service context.

Lower burnout employees are far more task and solution orientated, while higher burnout employees are focused on establishing personal relationships with the client and tend to take sole or personal responsibility for the client. Lower burnout employees are able to distance themselves from the client service role and are able to manage and exert power over the client, while higher burnout employees tend to empathise and identify with the clients problems.

Based on the research argument developed in Chapter 3, and previous research on role identity that suggests that role identities carry implications for role-related behaviours, it can be argued that the role identities of client service employees influence their role-related behaviours. Higher burnout employees view the client as demanding, controlling and dictatorial and describe themselves as more restricted, passive, powerless and subordinate than the lower burnout respondents do. This clearly suggests a lack of autonomy on the part of the client service employee and could indicate a loss of control over the client service situation. Since job control and autonomy are regarded as job resources that buffer the development of burnout (Fernet *et al.*, 2004; Maslach *et al.*, 1996; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007), it makes sense that higher burnout respondents report experiencing less control and autonomy.

Client service employees who feel powerless, restricted and who lack autonomy are also likely to experience low levels of self-efficacy and reduced levels of personal

accomplishment (Maslach, *et al.*, 1996; Xanthapoulou *et al.*, 2007). This is clearly reflected in the qualitative research where higher burnout respondents describe feeling powerless in helping the client. Low burnout respondents, on the other hand, displayed evidence of being able to manage the client and are often able to exert power over the client. It could be argued that the reason why lower burnout respondents are more likely to feel a sense of efficacy is because they define themselves as more knowledgeable and superior to the client.

Client service employees that describe themselves as dominated by, and subordinate to, the client will undoubtedly feel restricted in terms of being able to assist the client. Added to this is the fact that a number of higher burnout client service employees report receiving little support and resources from their companies. When employees have too much work to do with too few resources, burnout is likely to result (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti *et al.*, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2005; Maslach *et al.*, 1996). In the present research, this lack of resources appears to further contribute to the individual's feelings of powerlessness. It could be speculated that client service employees compensate for this sense of powerlessness by engaging with the client on a personal level. Since they are unable to assist the client appropriately through other means, empathising and identifying with the client may be the only means through which higher burnout client service employees feel able to assist the client. Furthermore, from the qualitative data it is also clear that higher burnout respondents expect recognition and appreciation from the client relationship. Given the fact that they feel disempowered to assist the client, the only way they may be able to attain this recognition is through engaging with the client on a personal level.

The finding that higher burnout client service employees tend to identify with and personalise the client relationship runs counter to one of the central consequences of burnout i.e. depersonalisation. This finding is, however, congruent with the results of a study conducted by Vanheule *et al.* (2003) that showed that high burnout individuals display a strong sense of personal obligation towards their clients and often manifest feelings of powerlessness in their interactions with the client. These individuals tend to identify closely with their clients and often feel threatened in their exchanges with them. Low burnout individuals, on the other hand, manage to maintain subjective distance from the client, hold flexible expectations regarding

client outcomes and attribute failure to the client or context rather than their own inadequacies. Instead of expressing feelings of powerlessness, low burnout individuals would resign themselves to the impossibility of difficult situations.

Instead of depersonalising the client, it could be argued that higher burnout respondents display evidence of withdrawing from work role by placing less importance on work and service to others. As an alternative to treating the client as an impersonal object, higher burnout respondents appear to be cynical towards work and the client service role by placing less importance of the notion of work and service to others. They are also less committed and loyal to their organisations, suggesting withdrawal from the employing organisation. This finding corresponds with the definition that depersonalisation entails the development of cynical attitudes towards work – characterised by withdrawal behaviours, the use of negative or derogatory language towards people at work and the possible intellectualisation of the work situation (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

The reason as to why higher burnout client service employees included in the present research do not depersonalise the client, could be explained through reference to their role-related expectations. As already indicated, the role identities of high burnout employees entail a perceived obligation that they help the client no matter what. Because they perceive a lack of autonomy, control and resources, they may feel unable to act in accordance with the identity standard. When an individual experiences an incongruence between the expectations contained in the identity standard (in this case helping the client at all costs) and the outcome of a situation, they tend to modify their role-related behaviours in order to ensure that future behavioural outcomes are congruent with role-related expectations (Stets & Burke, 2003). By taking personal responsibility for the client, identifying and empathising with the client, higher burnout employees may be exercising the only option that they feel is available to them to assist the client and hence live up to their role-related expectations. In such an instance, depersonalising the client relationship would not be an option.

Data from the interviews indicates that lower burnout respondents tend to work in teams and experience a large degree of support from co-workers. Higher burnout

respondents did not display evidence of this, and instead report taking personal or exclusive responsibility for the client. The fact that higher burnout employees take sole responsibility for the client appears to be partly a function of their work context, since they do report a lack of support, resources and understanding from management. Unclear institutional goals, a lack of leadership and social support and social isolation has been shown to contribute to the development of burnout (Albar-Marin & Garcia-Ramirez, 2005; Cherniss, 1980; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Furthermore, Leiter and Maslach (1988) report that good co-worker relationships and contact with one's supervisor are significant buffers to the development of burnout. Results from the Spearman correlation analysis of the relationship between burnout and satisfaction with supervisory relationships supports this finding that higher levels of emotional exhaustion are associated with less satisfactory co-worker and supervisory relationships. It can therefore be argued that in the context of the present study, lack of social support from both supervisors and co-workers contributes to the development of burnout among client service employees.

Probably one of the primary differences between higher and lower burnout respondents is the fact that lower burnout respondents partner with the client. Higher burnout respondents report inequitable relationships with the client assert that the client exerts considerable control over the client service interaction. Lower burnout respondents, on the other hand, report partnering with the client through a mutual exchange of respect, co-operation and information. Although lower burnout respondents define themselves as experts and more knowledgeable than the client, they realise that they need assistance and co-operation from the client in order to fulfil their service obligations. They therefore seek a partnership with the client, whereby both the client and the client service employee or company derive some benefit from the relationship while working towards a common goal. In accordance with research by Bakker *et al.* (2000) and Truchot and Deregard (2001) it can therefore be concluded that the establishment of a reciprocal partnership between client service employee and client may inhibit the development of burnout.

It appears from the interviews that higher burnout respondents experience a reduced sense of efficacy and control over the client service situation and describe feeling powerless in helping the client. These feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness

are also evident from the quantitative research. When asked to describe themselves on the set of contrasting adjective pairs, respondents with higher levels of burnout total describe themselves as less understanding and less patient than respondents that score lower on burnout total do. Respondents that score higher on reduced personal accomplishment, tend to describe themselves as less helpful, less considerate, meaner, less understanding and more passive than respondents that score lower on reduced personal accomplishment do. Furthermore, scores on emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation tend to be higher in respondents that describe themselves as less patient and less understanding than those that regard themselves as more understanding and patient. These sentiments correspond with the sense of defeat and reduced personal accomplishment observed among the higher burnout interview respondents during the interviews. Because higher burnout employees engage with the client on a personal level and internalise and identify with the client's problems, they also display a large degree of guilt that they are unable to assist the client to the level they would like to.

The findings of this study show that the role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions of higher burnout employees differ from the role-related behaviour and subjective perceptions of lower burnout employees. Higher burnout employees engage in both deep acting and surface acting, while lower burnout employees appear to engage only in surface acting. Lower burnout employees are more task and solution orientated than their higher burnout colleagues and experience a large degree of social support from both colleagues and supervisors. They demand co-operation from the client, and in so doing, establish a partnership with the client. Higher burnout employees appear to identify and empathise with the client and experience little social support from colleagues or management. They also report a lack of resources to do their work, and consequently feel powerless in being able to assist the client. Instead of depersonalising the client in order to cope, higher burnout employees appear to become more cynical towards work and organisation.

7.2.5 Research Question 5: Are lower burnout respondents able to self-verify more easily than higher burnout respondents?

As suggested by the discussions in the preceding sections, the role identities of client service employees appear to carry implications for role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions. These role-related perceptions and behaviours in turn appear to either facilitate or inhibit the development of burnout. A further way in which role identities could contribute to the development of burnout is through the process of self verification. According to Burke (1991) individuals attempt to act in accordance with the expectations contained within the identity standard of the role identity. When the individual is able to act in accordance with these behavioural expectations self verification occurs, resulting in feelings of esteem and personal mastery (Cast & Burke, 2002). Failure to match role-related outcomes with these expectations results in failed self-verification, which according to the research argument presented in Chapter 3, could contribute to the development of burnout.

The role of failed expectations in the development of burnout has been frequently documented (Brill, 1984; Cherniss, 1980; Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980: 13; Hyvonen *et al.*, 2009). Data from the present study found a significant, albeit low, negative correlation between number of years working in a client service environment/number of years working in total and reduced personal accomplishment. This appears to support the fact that burnout is expectationally mediated. Individuals that have been employed for longer apparently have more realistic expectations, rendering self-verification easier and inhibiting the development of burnout.

Results from the Spearman correlation analysis of the relationship between burnout and descriptions of the self in role confirm that feelings of reduced self-efficacy are related to burnout. Higher levels of reduced personal accomplishment are significantly associated with feeling less patient, less considerate and less helpful in the service situation. Higher burnout respondents also tend to feel less appreciated than their lower burnout colleagues. Furthermore, the quantitative data displayed a significant moderate negative relationship between the statement: "I feel I live up to the expectations of my clients" and burnout total and personal accomplishment. This illustrates that lower burnout employees are more likely to experience a sense of self-

verification and personal accomplishment in their roles than higher burnout respondents are. A significant negative relationship was also found between the statement: “I have built effective relationships with my clients” and burnout total, reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion/depersonalisation.

The qualitative data presented in the Chapter 5 indicate that lower burnout respondents experience a large degree of self-verification, while higher burnout respondent experience a sense of defeat and feel guilt for not helping the client. Higher burnout respondents also report feeling humiliated by the companies for which they work and, coupled with a sense of defeat, experience little self-verification. According to the existential perspective, the cause of burnout lies in people’s desire to believe that their lives are meaningful and that the things they do are significant (Pines, 2002). While the higher burnout respondents continue to remain committed to the client, they do display evidence of withdrawing from work. They cite work and service to others as less important than their lower burnout colleagues do, and display less committed and satisfied relationships with the organisation, their colleagues and supervisors. The existential perspective of burnout corresponds closely to Freudenberger and Richelson’s (1980) definition of burnout that maintains that burnout is a “state of fatigue of frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected reward”. In the case of the higher burnout respondents, they expect to be able to help the client no matter what and expect to derive a sense of personal gratification through client service work. Their subordinate role identities and a lack of support from the companies for which they work makes the attainment of these expectations difficult. This ultimately results in a sense of defeat, unworthiness and failure. According to Cherniss (1993) when people do not feel successful, they may chose to psychologically withdraw from work, resulting in depersonalisation and/or cynicism.

The findings of the present research appear consistent with the observation made by Hallsten (1993: 99) that burnout occurs when the enactment of an active, self-definition role is threatened with no alternative role at hand. According to Hallsten (1993) individuals strive to create a positive sense of self through role enactment. Role enactment therefore maintains a positive role identity if it is successful in verifying the identity standard. If the individual is unable to self-verify, the feelings of

powerlessness and low self-esteem experienced by the higher burnout interview respondents occur.

Results from the qualitative data clearly show that higher burnout client service employees feel subordinate to the client. They lack control over and autonomy within the client service situation and therefore feel powerless and less able to assist the client when compared with lower burnout respondents. By virtue of their role identities, higher burnout client service employees feel constrained in terms of their behavioural resources and options. They experience little support from their companies and therefore feel particularly restricted and powerless in terms of being able to meet the expectations of both the client and the organisation for which they work. Role identities in organisational settings are often differentiated by status and power (Stets & Tshushima, 2001: 286). Individuals with high status are less likely than low status individuals to experience self-verification due to the fact that they have fewer resources at their disposal to confirm their self views. In situations such as these, client service employees may find it difficult to self-verify and suffer the associated negative emotions.

7.2.6 Research Question 6: Do higher burnout employees experience, interpret and internalise the organisational client discourse differently when compared with lower burnout client service employees?

The differential role of organisational client discourse in the construction of the client service role identity between higher burnout and lower burnout respondents did not emerge as clearly from the qualitative data as anticipated. While a large section of the interview schedule was devoted to eliciting descriptions of the client service ethic of the organisation, few discernable differences could be detected between higher burnout employees and lower burnout employees. Both higher and lower burnout respondents described their organisations as having a professional client service ethic aimed at delivering excellent client service. Individual interpretations of the client ethic therefore had to be distilled from other sections of the interviews.

The role of organisational client discourse in shaping a subordinate role identity was clearly evident in the case of the higher burnout respondents from Company F.

Unfortunately, no interviews could be conducted with lower burnout respondents from this company. As a result, it is not possible to ascertain whether the organisational client discourse would have been differently interpreted and internalised by lower burnout respondents from Company F. From the qualitative data it is clear that higher burnout respondents from Company F feel humiliated by company management if they fail to deliver excellent client service. Respondents from the company report being treated like children as a result of having to perform company rituals like putting up a flag before being excused to visit the restroom and having a “floatie” placed above their heads if they performed poorly. These organisational rituals or practices are all part of an organisational discourse that could have contributed to the subordinate role identity amongst client service employees at Company F.

Respondents from Company F frequently remarked that they are fearful of the sanctions or punishments that could be imposed upon them if they do not provide excellent client service or if they make a mistake while assisting the client. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2004) one of the most prominent ways through which organisations shape the identities of their employees is through various forms of control. In the context of the present research, such mechanisms of control could inform a subordinate client service identity by suggesting to employees that they are inferior to the client. Such a discourse of sanctions may also suggest to the employee that the client be assisted no matter what. This could ironically be what propels the client service employee to break company policy and procedure.

Higher burnout respondents from all three service organisations report that their companies demand excellent client service, and that any compromise in terms of service delivery is not an option. In the case of both Company T and Company F, higher burnout respondents often reported breaking with company policy in order to deliver on excellent client service. It could be concluded that the discourse as interpreted by higher burnout respondents of these companies suggests that they place the client’s needs above company policy.

Higher burnout respondents from Company M often reported that their managers do not understand what it is like being a client service employee. They feel that the

organisation does not identify with them, and as a result, they feel misunderstood and unsupported. This may suggest that these client service employees experience a disparity between their experiences and the client discourse of the organisation. This could potentially result in alienation and ultimately withdrawal from the company.

It is clear from the interviews that employees from the same organisation differ with regard to the extent to which they draw on the organisational client discourse and construct their identities. The enactment of a specific role identity is an individual activity, and different client service employees within the same organisation may interpret and internalise the expectation contained in the organisational client discourse differently. This would also explain why client service employees belonging to the same organisation, and who are therefore exposed to the same client service discourse, adopt distinctly different client service role identities. Some similarities in the way higher burnout respondents construct identities in response to the client organisational discourse could however, be detected. A number of higher burnout respondents reported that their companies did not provide them with any support when dealing with the client. Lower burnout respondents from Company T, on the other hand, reported that their companies provide them with a platform whereby they are able to lodge complaints against unreasonable clients. By allowing the employee this vehicle for self-expression, Company T is validating the feelings and opinions of its employees. This validation may inform a sense of worthiness amongst these employees, allowing them to experience self-efficacy and self-verification. Vanheule *et al.* (2003: 333) refer to such a mechanism as a “mediating third party” and maintain that such mechanisms facilitate the creation of a subjective distance between the service employee and the client.

Although the present research found limited evidence of the role that organisational client discourse plays in the construction of the client service role identity, the literature pertaining to organisational discourse clearly shows how organisational discourse can influence the construction of role identity. From the data presented in this dissertation, it is clear that the role identities of higher burnout respondents differ from the role identities of lower burnout respondents. As a result, higher burnout respondents engage in different role-related behaviours when compared with lower burnout respondents. These role-related behaviours carry implications for the

development of burnout and the individual's propensity to self-verify. Despite the inconclusive nature of the findings pertaining to the relationship between organisational discourse and role identity, one could argue that organisations that make a conscious effort to define the client service ethic around the principles of partnership with the client, may be able to influence the role identities of their employees in such a way that the employees are able to manage their client service relationships better.

7.3 INTEGRATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The two diagrams below reflect the research argument developed in Chapter 3 as applied to the qualitative and quantitative results of the study. **Figure 19** refers to high burnout respondents, while **Figure 20** refers to lower burnout respondents.

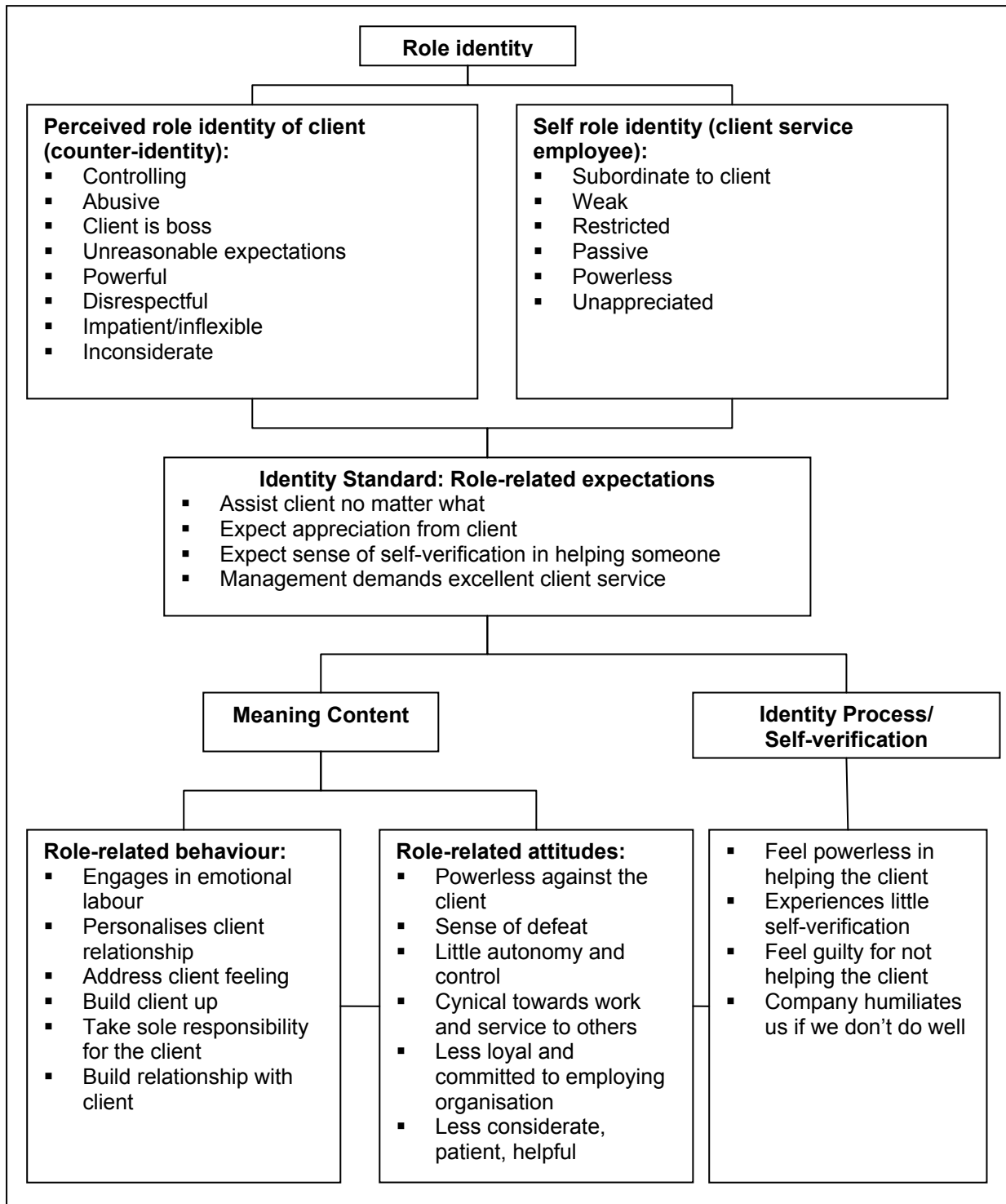


Figure 19: Role identity among higher burnout employees

The role identities of higher burnout respondents can be defined by the way they describe themselves and the client and by the role-related expectations contained in the identity standard. According to **Figure 19**, higher burnout respondents describe

the client as controlling, abusive, powerful and disrespectful. They perceive the client as being domineering and having unrealistic expectations. Higher burnout employees perceive themselves as weak, passive, powerless, unappreciated, restricted and subordinate to the client. As a result, the role-related expectations contained in the identity standard of higher burnout employees include placing the clients' needs first and helping the client no matter what. As mentioned, the expectations contained in the identity standard carry important implications for role-related behaviours and attitudes, which, according to the theory presented in the literature review, can contribute to the development of burnout. From a behavioural perspective, the expectation to help the client no matter what results in higher burnout employees going against company policy in order to assist the client. This results in considerable role conflict as they try to reconcile the needs of the client with the expectations of the company for which they work. The expectation that they help the client no matter what also results in higher burnout respondents taking sole responsibility for the client and personalising the client relationship. This results in considerable role overload and emotional exhaustion, as higher burnout respondents identify closely with the problems of their clients.

The role identities of higher burnout employees also result in role-related attitudes that pre-dispose them to the development of burnout. Because they view themselves as subordinate to and powerless against the client, they experience a lack of autonomy within and control over the client service situation. This contributes to reduced efficacy and diminished levels of personal accomplishment. Added to this is the fact that higher burnout respondents report receiving very little support from their companies, further contributing to these feelings of powerlessness.

It appears that higher burnout employees try to compensate for these feelings of powerlessness by empathising and engaging with the client on a personal level. This behaviour, coupled with the fact that higher burnout employees display a strong sense of personal obligation to the client, further contributes to emotional exhaustion among higher burnout client service employees.

It is also clear from the research that because of these feelings of powerlessness and subordination, higher burnout employees feel unable to live up to their expectations

of helping the client no matter what. As a result, higher burnout employees report little self verification within their roles and experience feelings of guilt, humiliation and cynicism.

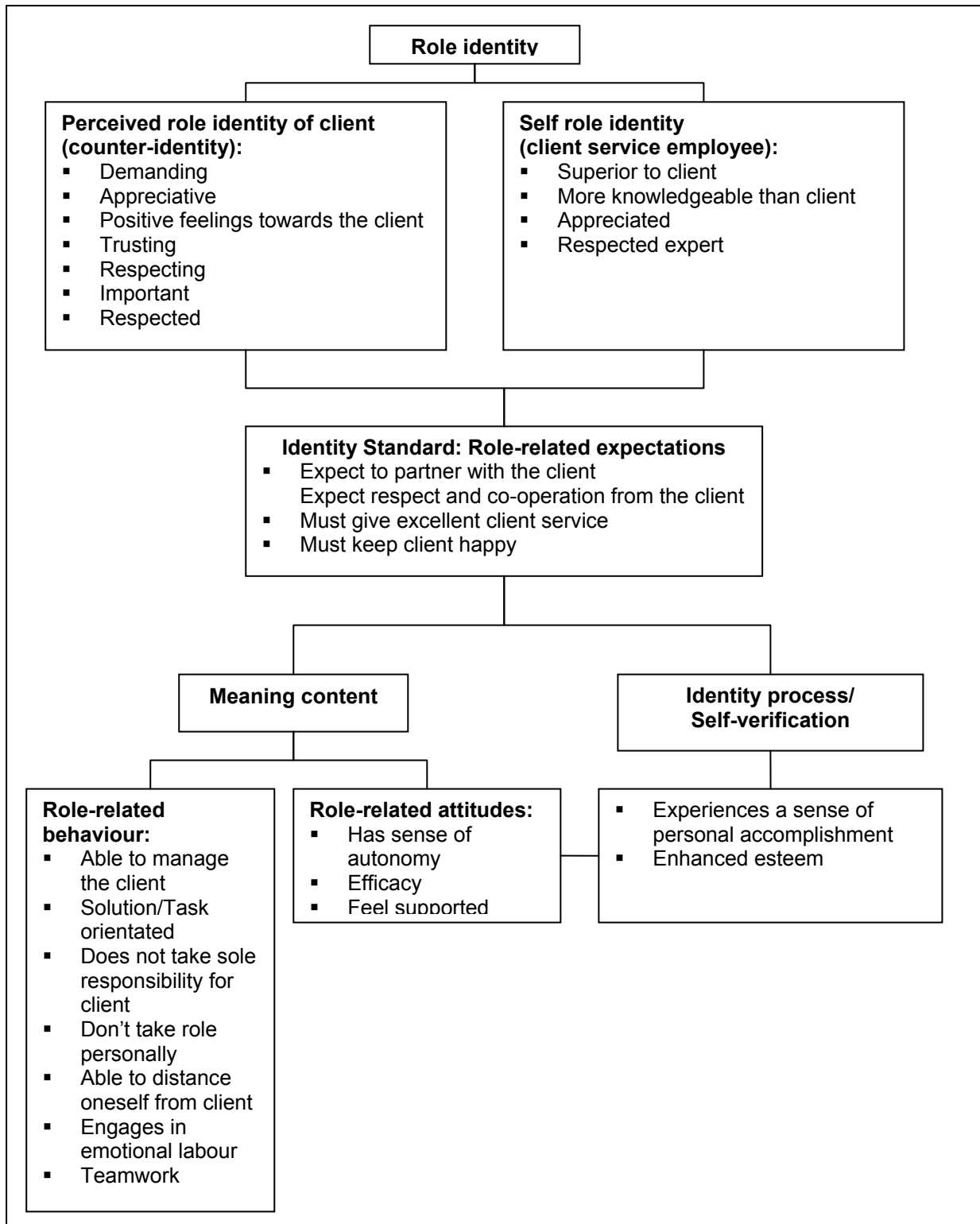


Figure 20: Role identity among lower burnout employees

The role identities of lower burnout employees are characterised by their role-related expectations and the way they describe themselves and the client. As indicated by

Figure 20, while lower burnout employees describe their clients as demanding, they generally perceive their clients as appreciative, respecting and trusting. They describe themselves as knowledgeable experts and often report feeling superior to the client. While they expect to provide excellent client service, they demand respect and cooperation from the client and aim to establish a partnership with the client characterised by a sense of reciprocity.

Because lower burnout respondents perceive themselves as knowledgeable experts in partnership with the client, they do not personalise the client relationship. Instead, lower burnout employees engage in task and solution orientated behaviour and are able to manage client expectations and behaviour. This provides them with a sense of autonomy within and control over the client relationship, engendering feelings of accomplishment and efficacy. They also describe receiving considerable support from colleagues when dealing with the client and consequently feel empowered within the client relationship.

Furthermore, the identity standards of lower burnout employees are not unrealistic or unreasonable. While they aim to partner with the client, they are able to distance themselves from the client and the client service role. By using this autonomy, power and control to meet realistic expectations, lower burnout employees are able to self-verify more easily than higher burnout employees.

7.4 CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

7.4.1 Academic contributions

The present research makes a number of significant contributions to the broader field of organisational behaviour and the study of burnout in client service settings in particular. The research introduces the concept of role identity as an important variable to consider in the development of burnout. By employing role identity as a construct, the research was able to link self descriptions, definitions of the counter role and role-related expectations within the client service context to the development of burnout. As was shown, these facets of the client service role identity are derived from organisational discourse and can therefore be managed and transformed

through this discourse. As a result, the study provides organisational theorists and practitioners with a further point of intervention with which to reduce burnout in client service settings. Previous research focusing on the relationship between social, professional and occupational identification and burnout has not managed to operationalise the identity construct in such a way that it can be used to inhibit the development of burnout.

The study has also developed a conceptual framework, derived from both qualitative and quantitative findings, that shows how role identity can contribute to role-related attitudes and behaviours that could lead to or inhibit the development of burnout. The study is therefore not merely descriptive in nature, but provides a tentative explanatory framework linking burnout and role identity and exploring the mechanisms by virtue of which this relationship exists. To summarise, the present study showed that:

1. The kind of service organisation to which the employee belongs is significantly associated with the development of burnout.
2. A number of demographic and biographic variables are associated with the development of burnout. These include length of employment, educational level and population group.
3. The role identities of higher burnout client service employees differ from the role identities of lower burnout client service employees.
4. The role identities of client service employees carry implications for role-related attitudes and behaviours, which could ultimately lead to the development of burnout.
5. The role identities of client service employees carry implications for the individual's propensity to self-verify.
6. Failure to self-verify contributes to the development of burnout.
7. The role identities of client service employees are in part, informed by the client discourse of the organisation.

The majority of studies utilising the MBI-HSS have done so within the context of human service workers who provide care or service of a personal nature to a recipient. The present study contributes to the field of burnout literature by illustrating

that the MBI–HSS can be used outside of the human services setting albeit with minor modifications.

Most studies into the antecedents of burnout have focused on situational or organisational variables. In addition to such research, the present study's focus on the relationship between role identity and burnout illustrates the role of subjective identity perceptions in the development of burnout. Furthermore, with its focus on the implications of role identity for the development of burnout, the present research introduces a social interactionist/sociological perspective to our understanding of burnout. This perspective deepens our understanding of the role of subjective perceptions in the development of burnout, and the role that organisational discourse can play in shaping these perceptions.

The present study also makes a methodological contribution to burnout research. Most burnout research has been quantitative in nature, focusing largely on the causal relationships between variables. This study expands on this tradition by adding a qualitative component to the quantitative component. In so doing, the study is not merely descriptive in nature, but offers a tentative explanatory framework, linking role identity to the development of burnout.

7.4.2 Contributions for client service organisations

The findings of the present study have practical significance for client service organisations that wish to positively influence the role identities of their employees. As was shown, the manner in which client service employees perceive themselves in the client service role holds implications for the development of burnout among these employees. If they feel powerless and weak in relation to the client, burnout is likely to result. If, however, they feel like knowledgeable experts exercising control and autonomy within the client service role, burnout is likely to be inhibited. If client service organisations wish to reduce the detrimental effects of burnout in the workplace, they need to pay careful attention to the way their client service employees perceive themselves in relation to the client. By linking the construction of the client service identity to organisational client discourse, a unique point of

intervention for organisations wishing to reframe organisational identities is provided. By being aware of the organisational factors that shape the client service role identity and understanding how and why certain role identities may predispose the employee to burnout, organisational management can play a role in developing organisational discourse that facilitates the enactment of healthy role identities. Since client service employees construct role identities in response to the dominant client discourse of the organisation, client service companies should exercise caution as to how they define and refer to the client/employee interaction through this discourse. In so doing, service organisations should pay particular attention to the role-related expectations they communicate through this discourse; how they refer to and represent the client; and how they refer to and engage with the service employee.

As was shown through this research, client service employees internalise role-related expectations communicated to them through the organisational client discourse (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Neale & Griffin, 2006). Organisations should therefore make a concerted effort to frame service-related expectations realistically and ensure that they provide the employee with the resources necessary to successfully meet these expectations. Both higher burnout and lower burnout respondents included in the qualitative phase of the research expect to provide excellent client service. What differentiates the higher burnout respondents from the lower burnout respondents is the fact that higher burnout respondents endeavour to help the client no matter what. Achieving this unrealistic expectation on the part of higher burnout employees is thwarted by the fact that they lack the necessary control and autonomy within the client service relationship to realise this expectation. Client service organisations should therefore be cautious of positioning the client as the boss and should provide employees with the necessary support and resources they need in order to experience a sense of autonomy and control in the role.

The manner in which the service organisation defines and refers to the client service employee is an important mechanism through which service organisations can influence the role identities of their employees. As was shown by the research, higher burnout employees tend to express less loyalty to and pride in their organisations. Employees that are not proud of where they work may internalise feelings of inferiority and shame, resulting in subordinate role identities. Client

service organisations should therefore instil pride in the organisation, by providing the client service employee with sufficient resources and social support to do their work effectively. Social support and resources can be cultivated by facilitating favourable relationships with supervisors and encouraging teamwork.

In order to inhibit the formation of subordinate and inferior role identities, service organisations must ensure that client service employees perceive their roles as being important to the success of the organisation (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). This can be achieved by referring to client service employees as knowledgeable experts and by allowing them authority and control within the client service setting. Client service organisations should also openly acknowledge the difficulties experienced by client service employees by providing them a platform through which they are able to openly air grievances and client-related complaints. This strategy was utilised well by Company T, where client service employees are able to discuss grievances against the client. This strategy appears to validate the client service employee, makes them feel important and establishes the organisational management as an ally to the employee.

The provision of a platform whereby client service employees are able to share their grievances and concerns also facilitates the creation of a social distance between the employee and the client. According to Mills and Moshavi (1999), the establishment of social distance between the employee and the client is the most appropriate way for client service professionals to maintain a degree of authority within the client service setting. Employee–client relationships characterised by psychological attachment, where service providers attempt to create a warm and comfortable relationship with their clients, tend to elevate the authority of the client and undermine the status of the client service employee.

Higher burnout employees included in the present study reported taking sole responsibility for the client without support or assistance from co-workers and management. Organisations should instead facilitate a culture of support where client service employees work in teams and can rely on each other for assistance. The facilitation of social support in the client service setting is also positively related

to deep acting, which, according to research by Brotheridge and Lee (2002) is less emotionally exhausting for the employee.

Through the implementation of these recommendations, client service organisations will create an empowered workforce. This should result in lower levels of burnout, and consequently, increased productivity and improved client relations.

7.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

As in other burnout research, the present study is also affected by causal limitations. Since both role identity and burnout are subjective experiences, it is difficult to ascertain from the research whether the role identities measured are in fact antecedents to burnout, or whether they are consequences of burnout. It has been well documented that burnout results in negative attitudes towards one's work, colleagues and clients. The negative attitudes of higher burnout respondents measured through both the quantitative and qualitative phase of the research may therefore be a consequence of burnout. From the qualitative research it can, however, be concluded that the negative attitudes embedded within the role identities of higher burnout respondents inform specific role-related behaviours. These behaviours appear to contribute to the development of burnout. It could therefore be argued that insight into causality can be inferred from the qualitative research. This inference is, however, explorative and further confirmatory research is needed to establish the direction of causality by virtue of which a relationship between burnout and role identity exists.

A further limitation of the present research is the low to moderate burnout scores. Only one respondent reflected a burnout score that could be classified as high. This may have been due to the fact that respondents were required to put their names on the questionnaires, and as a result, responded more moderately than they would have had the questionnaire been anonymous. These low to moderate burnout scores could have contributed to the fact that a large proportion of the adjective pairs displayed low or no correlation with burnout total and its subscales. Because burnout scores were used to differentiate between respondents and role identities

subsequently deduced from this differentiation, the differences in role identities between respondents classified as lower and higher burnout may have been clearer had burnout scores been more differentiated.

Descriptions of the client on the set of bipolar adjectives also showed fewer correlations with burnout than anticipated – given the explanation that role identity is constituted in part from comparisons of the self with the counter-role. Descriptions of the self along the set of bipolar adjectives displayed a number of significant correlations, but the majority of these correlations remained relatively low. The fewer than anticipated correlations between burnout and the adjective pairs could be explained with reference to the instrumentation used to measure role identity quantitatively and the subsequent analysis procedures. The Burke-Tully technique (1977) requires that respondents representing the counter-identity be included in the sample so that appropriate discriminant analysis can be performed. The present research deviated from this method and only included client service employees. Discriminant analysis could therefore not be performed and use was instead made of correlation analysis. While the adjective pairs used in the questionnaire were derived from interviews with client service employees, it may have been difficult for respondents to adequately differentiate between the meanings of each of the two pairs. This could have resulted in an arbitrary classification of the self and the counter-role according to the adjective pairs.

A further limitation to the present research is the relatively small quantitative sample size. This rendered certain robust statistical modelling methodologies to detect significant differences in the relationships between variables (such as structural equation modelling) impossible. Furthermore, while every effort was made to obtain a heterogeneous and representative sample, 76 percent of respondents in the research sample are white and 57 percent are from Company T. The relationships observed in the present research may therefore be influenced by the fact that the sample is relatively homogenous in terms of population group and not representative of the South African sample. This would render generalisability of the results to all client service employees in South Africa problematic.

A further limitation with regards to the generalisability of the finding is related to the fact that no respondents from Company F were included in the lower burnout sample for interviews. It is therefore not possible to compare the qualitative responses of higher burnout respondents from Company F with the qualitative responses of lower burnout respondents from Company F.

Although three different client service organisations representing three distinct service industries participated in the research, caution should be exercised when generalising the findings of the present research to a broader range of service sectors. The service workers included in the sample cannot be described as human service professionals, since they do not engage with the personal problems of clients in the same manner in which doctors, nurses and psychologists do. Service work conducted by these professions is arguably more emotionally demanding than the work conducted by the respondents in the present sample, and while the present research did uncover aspects related to emotion work, professions involved in more emotionally demanding service encounters may display different role identity characteristics.

7.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite these limitations, the study attests to the importance of role identity as a construct to consider in the development of burnout. Since the concept of role identity is a relatively new concept in the field of organisational behaviour, the research presented is largely exploratory. While the explanatory conceptual framework linking role identity to the development of burnout is supported by both the qualitative and quantitative findings of the study, it remains explorative. Further confirmatory research is therefore needed to establish causality and directional links between the burnout components and role identity. For instance, the conceptual model developed through this research suggests that role identities carry implications for role-related behaviours and subjective perceptions. While this relationship is theoretically supported by the literature and the qualitative findings of the present study, further quantitative research is needed to establish the strength of this relationship, and whether extraneous variables have the potential to influence the nature of this

relationship. Furthermore, the conceptual model presented here also suggests that the subjective perceptions and role-related behaviours that are derived from the client service role identity have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit the development of burnout. Again, while this relationship is supported by the literature on burnout and the qualitative findings of this study, quantitative research is needed to establish the nature of this relationship. It would also prove useful to determine which of the burnout components are related to the various role-related behaviours and perceptions.

While the present research established that the role identities of higher burnout employees differ from the role identities of lower burnout employees, further research is needed to quantify the nature of this difference. This could be achieved by clearly operationalising the role identity construct for application in the field of organisational behaviour and within the client service setting. The Burke-Tully (1977) measure of role identity used in the present research is cumbersome to administer and responses to the adjective pairs are often open to interpretation. Further research could therefore be greatly enhanced with the development of a role identity measure that treats role identity as a single construct that can be used in multi-variate analysis.

Further research is also needed to differentiate between the construct of role identity and other constructs utilised within the field of organisational behaviour. The concept of work ethic, for instance, may be related to role identity, and further research will be needed to untangle the conceptual underpinnings of each of these terms.

While it has been theorised that client service employees will create role identities based on the dominant client discourse of the organisation, it cannot be concluded that role identities are merely a function of organisational client discourse. Individuals occupy a number of role identities which they enact at different times and in different contexts. Role identities are therefore complex phenomena, which could also be influenced by a number of biographical and lifestyle factors. Further research into the relationship between role identity and burnout should therefore be explored within the context of demographic/biographic and lifestyle variables. In the context of the present study, a number of these variables displayed significant relationships with

burnout. It is not clear from the present study whether and how these variables interact with role identity. It is therefore suggested that further research explore these interactions.

The manner in which the organisation refers to and defines the client through its organisational discourse informs the role-related expectations of the client service employee. These role-related expectations become the identity standard against which the individual will judge his or her role-related behaviours. Organisations therefore have immense power in framing the role identities of their members. Further research is needed to determine how client service employees interpret and internalise these discourses. This could be done through the use of experimental research designs, where different types of client service discourse are introduced to different research samples to determine the impact on role-related behaviour and subjective perception. This will enable the development of recommendations to organisational management as to how best to frame and communicate the client discourse to engage and empower their employees. Since the construction of a client service role identity is related to organisational discourse, further insights into the manner in which organisational discourse informs role identity could be exposed by limiting the sample to respondents representative of a single service industry.

The present research uncovered a couple of interesting findings regarding the relationship between role identity, emotional labour and burnout. Since evidence of emotional labour was only measured qualitatively, and the distinction between deep and surface acting made based on limited qualitative observations, further research is needed to explore these relationships in greater detail. Questions that could guide such research would include whether or not role identity mediates the relationship between emotional labour and burnout, or whether role identity influences the manner in which employees deal with the emotional demands of their work.

7.7 IN CONCLUSION

The present research has shown how the role identities of client service employees are associated with the development of burnout. By influencing the enactment of role-related behaviours and informing role-related attitudes and subjective

perceptions, the client service role identity can either facilitate or inhibit the development of burnout. Since role identities also incorporate role-related expectations, they carry implications for the self-verification of the client service employee. As was shown through this research, the potential to self-verify greatly reduces the development of burnout.

It is therefore hoped that the present research has provided researchers and practitioners in the field of organisational behaviour with a further point of intervention when addressing burnout in client service settings. As the global service sector grows, competition amongst service firms is likely to increase. This will undoubtedly result in greater service expectations amongst the public at large. Du Gay and Salaman's (1992: 622) remark that clients have become the "moral centre of the enterprising universe" is likely to gain in relevance, as client service employees are placed under greater pressure by their service organisations. This trend is likely to result in increasing levels of burnout in the industry as a whole. It is therefore important that organisations acknowledge the role of role identity in the development of burnout and actively implement interventions aimed at creating empowered client service identities.

While it is acknowledged that burnout is a complex phenomenon that must be addressed on numerous fronts, service organisations and managers can greatly reduce the levels of experienced burnout by creating an organisation client discourse that positions the client service employee as an empowered partner in the service relationship. Such a discourse is likely to result in realistic expectations regarding the service relationship and lead to the formation of client service role identities that enable the employee to stimulate the formation of role identities that result in rewarding client service relationships.