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The Relationship Between Organizational Dehumanization and Outcomes:  
The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** The present research examines the influence of organizational dehumanization on the core dimension of burnout, i.e. emotional exhaustion. In addition, we examine how emotional exhaustion in turn influences employees' health (i.e., psychological strains and physical complains) and turnover intentions. In other words, we investigated the mediating role played by emotional exhaustion in the relationship between organizational dehumanization and employees' health and turnover intentions.

**Methods:** Data were collected among a sample of Belgian employees through questionnaires.

**Results:** As expected, the results of structural equation modeling analyses indicated that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationships between organizational dehumanization on the one hand and employees' health and turnover intentions on the other hand.

**Conclusions:** These findings contribute to the literature on employees' burnout by highlighting a new predictor of this syndrome and its subsequent outcomes.

**Keywords:** Organizational dehumanization, burnout, psychological strains, health complains, turnover intentions.

## The Relationship Between Organizational Dehumanization and Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Burnout is one of the most studied problems in the field of occupational health psychology [1]. The burnout construct is commonly defined as “a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one’s occupation and doubtful of one’s capacity to perform” [2]. More particularly, it is conceptualized as a function of three important dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/ cynicism, and lack of personal accomplishment [3]. According to several scholars, emotional exhaustion which refers to feelings of being depleted and drained emotionally by work is nevertheless the central dimension of the burnout syndrome (e.g., [1]). Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that high levels of burnout (including the emotional exhaustion dimension) is linked to several health problems (e.g., increasing depressive symptoms and life dissatisfaction; [4]) and negative work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., increasing employees’ absenteeism; [5]).

Although much effort has been devoted to the identification of the predictors of employees’ burnout and even if prior studies have already come up with an extensive list of its antecedents including both situational and individual factors (e.g., [6]), to our knowledge, solely one study [7] has considered the potential influence of the organizational dehumanization construct. This latter phenomenon has been very recently defined in the literature as employees’ perceptions that their organization rejects their human integrity, treats them as a tool, an object and an instrument useful for the organizational goals (see [8; 7]). More importantly, a full understanding of the outcomes of this organizational dehumanization-emotional exhaustion relationship in terms of employees’ health and organizational functioning is still totally lacking. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources model (e.g., [9; 10]), we propose in this research that employees’ emotional exhaustion will mediate the positive relationship between organizational dehumanization and negative outcomes for both employees’ health (i.e., increasing psychological strains and physical complains) and the organization (i.e., increasing turnover

intentions).

### **Organizational dehumanization and outcomes**

Emanating from the social psychology literature and the seminal work of Haslam [11], the dehumanization phenomenon is broadly described as “the result of a process, experience, or attitude by which someone is made to feel more like an animal or machine than human, with reduced capacities for reasoning, will, and sentiment” [8, pp. 571-572]. Originally, the dehumanization phenomenon has been studied and considered in the context of race, immigration, and genocide [11]. More recently, several authors have proposed that dehumanization is a subtle and everyday life phenomenon (e.g., [12]) that can also occur in organizational and work settings so that employees might feel dehumanized by the organization they work for (e.g., [13; 8; 7; 14]). Interestingly, scholars claimed that employees who feel dehumanized by their organization experience low levels of well-being and health (e.g., [15]). Indeed, according to Christoff [15], dehumanizing treatments even subtle might thwart the satisfaction of individuals’ basic psychological needs (e.g., needs for relatedness) which should lead to detrimental consequences for individuals such as an increase of their level of stress or anxiety disorders.

Relying on the JD-R model which is undeniably the most influential model to explain burnout (e.g., [9; 10; 16]), we argue that organizational dehumanization represents an important job demand for employees. Job demands refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” such as the burnout syndrome [9, p. 312]. Given this definition, one can reasonably assume that experiencing an organizational environment treating them like a tool or an instrument requires a persistent mental effort on the part of employees to cope with such a negative treatment, finally leading to an increase of employees’

emotional exhaustion. However, to date, at the empirical level, few studies have examined the impact of the organizational dehumanization construct on burnout. Among these few studies, Baldissarri et al. [17] reported that individuals who perceived as being treated as an instrument by their supervisor presented higher levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Recently, Caesens et al. [7] found that organizational dehumanization perceptions leads to an increase of employees' emotional exhaustion, physical complains (i.e., increasing sleeping troubles), and a reduction of employees' job satisfaction. Based on our reasoning and the scanty empirical evidence that was pointed out, we posited the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Organizational dehumanization is positively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

### **The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion**

While the JD-R model is the most popular framework used to explain the emergence of job burnout, it is also the most prevalent model used to examine the consequences of this occupational syndrome is (e.g., [9; 10; 16]). According to this theoretical framework, job demands leads to negative health-related problems through burnout. This mechanism has been called the energetic process or health impairment process (e.g., [9; 10; 18]). More precisely, according to this process, high levels of job demands, which necessitate sustained effort, may drain employees' resources and energy depletion (i.e., burnout) leading to health problems [19]. In line with this view, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies provided support for the health impairment process of the JD-R model in different countries (e.g., China, Finland, Netherlands; e.g., [18; 20]). For instance, Schaufeli and Bakker [18] showed using a cross-sectional design that burnout fully mediated the relationship between job demands and health problems. In addition, using a two-wave cross-lagged panel design (with a 3-year time lag), Hakanen et al. [21] found support for the health impairment process among a sample of dentists. More precisely, the results of their study indicated that burnout mediated the positive

relationship between job demands (i.e., quantitative workload, perceived problems in the physical work environment) and depression. Besides from health-related problems, it has also been found that employees suffering from burnout are more likely to engage in several withdrawal behaviors such as increasing levels of absence [5] or turnover intentions (e.g., [18]).

In this research, relying on the health impairment process of the JD-R model (e.g., [9; 10; 16]) and in line with our first hypothesis, we propose that the effect of organizational dehumanization on emotional exhaustion carries over to employees' health problems (i.e., increasing psychological strains and physical complains) and to turnover intentions. Precisely, we suggested the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between organizational dehumanization and employees' (a) psychological strains, (b) physical complains, and (c) turnover intentions.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Six hundred seventy-four employees from a local governmental company located in Belgium were invited to complete a questionnaire as part of a larger research project. The final sample comprised the 277 employees (41.10% response rate) who fully completed our survey with respect to our variables of interest (i.e., organizational dehumanization, emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, physical complains, and turnover intentions). More particularly, these participants were invited by email or by letter to complete an electronic survey or a paper-pencil questionnaire. Furthermore, all participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and that their participation to this study was voluntary. This project received approval from the University Research Ethics committee. The mean age of the participants was 42.04 years ( $SD = 10.63$ ) and the final sample consisted of 58.84% of males and 36.46% of females (4.69% did not indicate their gender). Regarding their

educational level, most participants had a bachelor degree (30.68%) or a upper high school degree (24.19%), and have been working for their organization for 13.59 years in average ( $SD = 10.47$ ). Most respondents were employed in administrative services (40.43%), in blue collar jobs (15.88%) and in cleaning services (14.44%).

## Measures

**Organizational dehumanization.** Organizational dehumanization was assessed using the full 11-item scale developed by Caesens and her colleagues [7] (e.g., “*My organization treats me as if I were an object*”). These items were answered on a seven-point agreement Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“*Strongly disagree*”) to 7 (“*Strongly Agree*”).

**Emotional exhaustion.** Emotional exhaustion was measured using the full 9-item subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI; [3]) (e.g., “*I feel emotionally drained from my work*”). These items were rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“*Never*”) to 7 (“*Every day*”).

**Psychological strains.** Psychological strains were measured using 5 items from Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, and Kelloway ([22]; Studies 1 and 2) (e.g. “*I have felt anxious at work*”). Participants indicated the frequency with which they felt these psychological strains at work during the last thirty days. Participants responded on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“*Never*”) to 7 (“*Always*”).

**Physical complains.** Employees’ physical complains were assessed using 6 items from the Physical Strains Inventory (PSI) [23] (e.g., “*Trouble sleeping, Headache, Fatigue, Eye strain, Dizziness, Loss of appetite*”). These six items or symptoms were selected from the already shortened scale of the Physical Symptoms Inventory (12-item) developed by Spector and Jex [23]. This selection procedure was already used by prior scholars (e.g., 7). Participants reported the frequency with which they felt some physical symptoms during the last thirty days and provided their responses using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“*Never*”) to 7 (“*Always*”).

**Turnover intentions.** We measured turnover intentions using the full 3-item scale from Jaros [24] (e.g., “*I often think about quitting this organization*”). Participants indicated their responses using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“*Strongly disagree*”) to 7 (“*Strongly agree*”).

**Control variables.** Following Becker ([25]) (2005) recommendations, the empirical relationships between the demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, organizational tenure, education) and our dependent variables (i.e., emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, physical complains, and turnover intentions) were analyzed. More particularly, as indicated in Table 1, age and organizational tenure were negatively correlated with turnover intentions, while education was positively related to psychological strains and turnover intentions. Thus, we conducted our statistical analyses on our final model with and without age, organizational tenure and education as control variables<sup>3</sup> (see [26]). These results for these two analyses were essentially identical, so that the inclusion of control variables does not seem to influence the interpretation of our findings. Thus, to reduce model complexity and for parsimony reasons, the results presented below are performed without any control variables [25].

## Results

### Confirmatory Factor Analyses

First, confirmatory factor analyses were performed (LISREL 8.8) to assess the discriminant validity of our five variables of interest (i.e., organizational dehumanization, emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, physical complains, and turnover intentions). Results indicated that the five-factor model has a very satisfactory fit to the data ( $\chi^2(517)=1375.75, p < .001$ , CFI=.97, NNFI=.97, RMSEA=.08 [90% CI = .073, .083],  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, this model was superior, based on the chi-square difference test, to an alternative model where (a) organizational dehumanization and emotional exhaustion, (b)

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<sup>3</sup> Missing values on age, organizational tenure, and education were computed using the multiple imputation method in Lisrel 8.8.

physical complains and psychological strains, (c) emotional exhaustion and physical complains, (d) emotional exhaustion and psychological strains, (e) and organizational dehumanization and intentions to quit were specified to be a single factor. All factor loadings were also above .50. The five variables were thus treated and considered as separated constructs in the subsequent analyses.

### **Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (i.e. means and standard deviations), reliability coefficients (Cronbach alphas), and Pearson correlations of all study variables. As expected, organizational dehumanization is positively related to emotional exhaustion. In addition, both organizational dehumanization and emotional exhaustion are positively correlated to psychological strains, physical complains, and turnover intentions.

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 INSERT TABLE 1 HERE  
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### **Structural Model**

Results of analyses indicated that the hypothesized model was correctly fitting the data ( $\chi^2(523) = 1447.52, p < .001$ , CFI = .97, NNFI = .97, RMSEA = .08 [90% CI = .075, .085],  $p < .001$ ). Yet, a first alternative model adding a direct path between organizational dehumanization and physical complains was superior to the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 9.54, p < .01$ ). In addition, a second alternative model adding a path between organizational dehumanization and psychological strains was superior to the first alternative model 1 ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 13.44, p < .001$ ). Therefore, the second alternative model was thus considered as the final model and had a very good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(521) = 1424.54, p < .001$ , CFI = .97, NNFI = .97, and RMSEA=.08 [90% CI = .074, .084],  $p < .001$ ).

As displayed in Figure 1, organizational dehumanization is positively related to emotional exhaustion ( $\gamma=.50, p<.001$ ) which, in turn, is positively associated with psychological strains ( $\beta=.72, p<.001$ ), physical complains ( $\beta=.72, p<.001$ ), and turnover intentions ( $\beta=.51,$

$p < .001$ ). In addition, organizational dehumanization has a direct positive effect on psychological strains ( $\gamma = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and physical complains ( $\gamma = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results support our Hypothesis 1.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE  
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### **Indirect effects**

We used the bootstrapping technique proposed by Hayes ([27]; macro process in SPSS) in order to assess the indirect effect of organizational dehumanization on the three outcomes (i.e., psychological strains, physical complains, turnover intentions) through emotional exhaustion. Results of these analyses indicated that these indirect effects were significant (indirect effect for psychological strains = .31; BCa95% CI = [.24; .39], indirect effect for physical complains = .26; BCa95% CI = [.19; .33], and indirect effect for turnover intentions = .24; BCa95% CI = [.15; .35]), providing support for Hypothesis 2a, b, and c.

### **Discussion**

To our knowledge, this research is the first with the goal of examining the potential mediating role of employees' emotional exhaustion in the relationship between organizational dehumanization and outcomes negative for both employees and the organization. As expected, we found that organizational dehumanization positively influenced employees' exhaustion, which in turn increased their psychological strains at work, their physical complains and their turnover intentions.

First and foremost, the present research shows that perceptions of being dehumanized by the organization are harmful to employees because it increases their emotional exhaustion. This finding is consistent with the proposition that feeling dehumanized by the organization, treated as an object or tool useful for the organizational ends acts as an important job demands by thwarting employees' basic needs [15] and requires psychological efforts for employees to cope with it. This research therefore contributes to the current literature by stressing the relevance to

consider organizational dehumanization as a job demand that drives the emergence of the burnout syndrome. In addition, these results are in line a prior and unique study which indicated that organizational dehumanization is positively related to employees' emotional exhaustion [7].

Second, this research found that employees' emotional exhaustion mediates the relationships between organizational dehumanization and employees' psychological strains and physical complains. As a whole, these results are congruent with the health impairment or the energetic process of the JD-R model (e.g., [9; 10]). Organizational dehumanization depletes employees' resources leading them to exhaustion at work, which in turn triggers health-related problems so that employees feel more anxious, tense, and nervous at work and complains more about their health by reporting, for instance, more fatigue or headaches. Besides deleterious consequences for employees' health, the organizational dehumanization-emotional exhaustion relationship is also harmful for the organization' welfare as it also increases employees' intentions to quit their organization. These findings clearly contribute to the recent and growing literature on the organizational dehumanization construct by enlarging our knowledge of its nomological network (e.g., [8; 7]). Findings of the current research also extend those from previous studies on the job burnout process (e.g., [18]) and, in particular, those which highlighted the negative impact of emotional exhaustion on employees' psychological and physical health (e.g., [21]) and on turnover intentions (e.g., [18]).

Despite the novelty of our findings, this research is not without limitations. First, our research relies on a cross-sectional study. Therefore, the design used in this research makes difficult to draw any conclusion regarding causality. One may argue that emotional exhaustion might lead to perceptions of being dehumanized by the organization or that reciprocal relationships exist between the two constructs. More research using longitudinal designs and repeated measurement is needed in order to solve this critical issue. Second, the use of self-reported measures exposed our findings to the common method variance (CMV) bias described

as the “variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures represent” [28; p. 879]. Accordingly, this bias might have inflated artificially the correlations found in this research. In order to prevent this bias and following recommendations of several scholars (e.g., [28]), we assured to participants the anonymity of their responses and asked them to be as honest as possible in their responses. In addition, the Harman single-factor test reveals a very poor fit for the one-factor model, which suggested that CMV might not have affected our data. Third, the sample used to test our hypotheses is also quite small compared to the number of indicators included in our structural model and thus the number of parameters to be estimated. Further, this sample is composed of employees located in Belgium. Therefore, future research is needed to replicate our research using bigger samples and with data collected among more culturally-diverse populations in order to increase the generalizability of the results. Fourth, a future interesting line to study might be to analyze the role of the dehumanizing treatments from other important entities in the organizational life such as supervisors or colleagues and their impact on employees’ health.

Finally, some conclusions can be made from this study notably in how to promote employees’ psychological and physical health. First, in light of the above findings, we suggest that organizational dehumanization should be incorporated and considered as an important job demand in the burnout prevention programs. Second, based on the current findings, it can be proposed to reduce perceptions of dehumanizing treatments received from the organization. Interestingly, previous studies already indicated that procedural justice [8] and perceived organizational support [7] are negatively related to employees’ perceptions of organizational dehumanization, managers should then promote fairness in the way they implement their human resources policies and try to increase perceptions of support from the organization.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations*

|                          | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1    | 2      | 3       | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      | 9     |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. Gender                | --       | --        | --   |        |         |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 2. Age                   | 42.04    | 10.63     | -.04 | --     |         |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 3. Organizational tenure | 13.59    | 10.47     | -.07 | .70*** | --      |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 4. Education             | --       | --        | -.05 | -.18** | -.05    | --     |        |        |        |        |       |
| 5. OD                    | 4.08     | 1.40      | -.01 | .09    | .15*    | .07    | (.93)  |        |        |        |       |
| 6. Emotional exhaustion  | 2.56     | 1.45      | .11  | .01    | .05     | .05    | .46*** | (.93)  |        |        |       |
| 7. Psychological strains | 3.33     | 1.45      | -.02 | .01    | .11     | .26*** | .50*** | .76*** | (.92)  |        |       |
| 8. Physical complains    | 2.89     | 1.26      | -.09 | .01    | .08     | .01    | .41*** | .68*** | .71*** | (.86)  |       |
| 9. Turnover intentions   | 2.43     | 1.73      | .05  | -.19** | -.22*** | .26*** | .34*** | .49*** | .52*** | .39*** | (.93) |

*Note.*  $N = 277$  (excepted for gender  $N = 264$ , age  $N = 262$ , organizational tenure  $N = 256$ , and education  $N = 258$ ). OD: organizational dehumanization. Gender was coded 0 for men and 1 for female. Education was coded 1 for “primary school”, 2 for “lower secondary school”, 3 for “higher secondary school”, 4 for “bachelor’s degree”, 5 for “master’s degree”, 6 for “Ph.D”, and 7 = other. Cronbach’s alphas are provided in parentheses on the diagonal. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

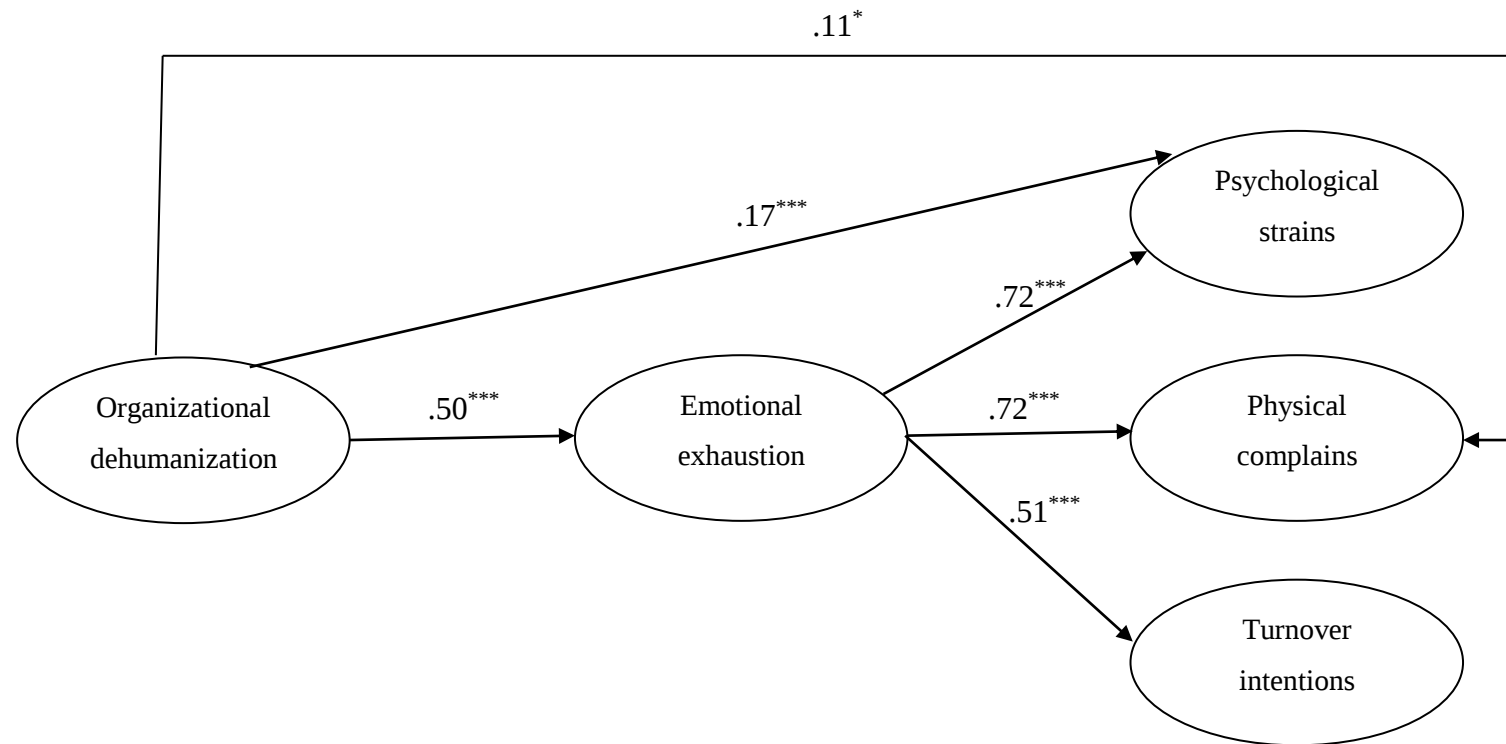


Figure 1.  $N = 277$ . Completely standardized path coefficients for the alternative Model 3.

$**p < .05$ ,  $***p < .001$ .