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# The Relationship Between the Big Five Personality Factors and Burnout: A Study Among Volunteer Counselors

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**ABSTRACT.** In the present study of 80 volunteer counselors who cared for terminally ill patients, the authors examined the relationship between burnout as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (C. Maslach, S. E. Jackson, & M. P. Leiter, 1996) and the 5 basic (Big Five) personality factors (A. A. J. Hendriks, 1997): extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect/autonomy. The results of 3 separate stepwise multiple regression analyses showed that (a) emotional exhaustion is uniquely predicted by emotional stability; (b) depersonalization is predicted by emotional stability, extraversion, and intellect/autonomy; and (c) personal accomplishment is predicted by extraversion and emotional stability. In addition, some of the basic personality factors moderated the relationship between relative number of negative experiences and burnout, suggesting that personality may help to protect against known risks of developing burnout in volunteer human service work.

**Key words:** Big Five, burnout, personality, stress and coping, volunteer counselors

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**IN THE BURNOUT DOMAIN**, most previous researchers have focused on the situational stressors influencing burnout, such as excessive workload, emotionally demanding interactions with patients for volunteer counselors, and lack of control or participation in decisions that affect the worker's environment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In the present study

among volunteer counselors, we took a different perspective by acknowledging that the risk of burnout may differ not only across situations but also across individuals. The central aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between (a) the Big Five factors of personality and (b) burnout in volunteers.

### **Occupational Burnout**

Originally, theorists of *burnout* described the syndrome as a specific kind of occupational stress among health care workers that results from demanding and emotionally charged relationships between caregivers and their recipients (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). More specifically, burnout is usually defined as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993). *Emotional exhaustion* refers to the depletion of psychic energy or the draining of emotional resources. *Depersonalization* refers to the development of negative, cynical attitudes toward the recipients of one's services. *Lack of personal accomplishment* is the tendency to evaluate one's own work with recipients negatively, an evaluation that is often accompanied by feelings of insufficiency (Maslach, 1993).

Although more recent research has shown that burnout can be found both within and outside the human services (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2002), human service professionals are generally at relatively high risk for burnout (Schaufeli, 2003). That circumstance is because they are very often confronted with emotionally demanding relationships with the recipients of their care. Such relationships are inherently difficult and upsetting because human service professionals have to deal with troubled people who suffer and are in need.

### **Volunteering**

Freudenberger (1974) originally used the concept of burnout itself to characterize the psychological state of volunteers who worked in alternative health care situations. Therefore, it is surprising that few subsequent researchers have focused on burnout among volunteer workers (Metzer, Dollard, Rogers, & Cordingley, 1997). Hence, although in most studies on burnout, researchers have studied professional health care workers, in the present study we focused on volunteer caregivers of terminally ill patients. The work of volunteer caregivers complements professional human service and family support and takes place during both the day and the night. It includes listening and talking to the patients and their families, providing food and medicine for the patients, and sitting at the bedsides of the patients.

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Reasons to engage in volunteer work can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Metzer, 1996, 2003) and may include a need to be useful to others, a desire for the rewarding social interactions that come with the work, or a desire to receive the social approval of volunteer work (Frisch & Gerrard, 1981; Morrow-Howell & Mui, 1989). Clary et al. (1998), using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on a diverse range of volunteers, identified six motivational functions that volunteering fulfills, including values; understanding; enhancement; and social, career, and protective functions. Researchers have shown that satisfaction with the work, social approval, and social rewards are even evaluated higher than in ordinary jobs (e.g., Pearce, 1983).

Researchers have reported a number of personality attributes as consistently correlating with volunteering. Penner (2002) and Penner and Finkelstein (1998) have shown pro-social personality generally and other-oriented empathy and helpfulness particularly to be significantly positively correlated with volunteer activities. Costa and McCrae (1992) reported other-oriented empathy as correlating quite strongly with the dimension of agreeableness of the Big Five personality factors. Elshaug and Metzer (2001) recently studied the personality attributes of volunteer food preparers and volunteer fire fighters using the five-factor model of personality and found significant correlations between volunteering and the dimensions of agreeableness and extraversion. When compared with paid food preparers, volunteer food preparers were more agreeable. Volunteer food preparers were also more extraverted in terms of displaying a preference for interaction with and the company of others, although they did not differ on the gregariousness, excitement seeking, and activity dimensions of extraversion. The two volunteer groups (food preparers and fire fighters) differed only on the dimension of assertiveness.

Although people generally experience volunteer work positively, it may contain stressful elements (e.g., Di-Mola, Tamburini, & Fusco, 1990; Field & Johnson, 1993). In addition to the feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, and desperation of the patients themselves and of their direct families, volunteer caregivers have to deal with their own feelings. Moreover, the rewarding aspects of the work may sometimes be frustrated. Indeed, in a longitudinal study of volunteer HIV/AIDS caregivers, Ross, Greenfield, and Bennett (1999) identified client problems, role ambiguity, emotional overload, organizational factors, and a high degree of depersonalization as predictors of dropout.

### **Burnout and Lower Level Personality Variables**

Although the current literature indicates the possibility that stressful aspects of the work environment are more important predictors of burnout than is personality, it is important for researchers to consider individual variation (Pick & Leiter, 1991). Indeed, during the last two decades, quite a few studies have indicated the possibility that personality plays an important role in the

development of burnout. Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) counted more than 100 burnout studies in the literature that included one or two constructs from a long list of lower level personality variables. Examples of these personality variables are hardiness, locus of control, Type A behavior, self-esteem, and achievement motivation.

The main problem with these earlier studies is that personality was usually measured by simple off-the-shelf measures of convenience (Hogan, 1990). That is, the inclusion of certain personality variables in a research design seems to have been dependent more often on the arbitrary choice of the researcher than on a theory of personality. It is therefore not surprising that the literature still does not provide a coherent picture of the relationship between personality and burnout. The field clearly needs studies relating an integral model of personality to occupational burnout.

### **The Big Five Personality Factors and Burnout**

In the present study, we related an integral model of personality to burnout among volunteer counselors who cared for terminally ill patients. Studies relating basic personality factors to burnout may give us more insight into whether burnout is a social phenomenon or is more related to individual variability. Moreover, such studies will help us to identify individuals who are at risk for developing burnout. Personality can be described in terms of five basic factors, often labeled as the *Big Five* (e.g., Digman, 1990; John, 1990; McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1984). The current labels for the bipolar factors are (I) *Extraversion versus Introversion*, (II) *Agreeableness versus Hostility*, (III) *Conscientiousness versus Lack of Conscientiousness*, (IV) *Emotional Stability versus Neuroticism*, and (V) *Intellect/Autonomy or Openness to Experience versus Lack of Intellect/Autonomy or Closedness to Experience*.

*Extraversion* is characterized by a tendency to be self-confident, dominant, active, and excitement seeking. Extraverts show positive emotions, higher frequency and intensity of personal interactions, and a higher need for stimulation. In addition, extraversion is, in general, associated with a tendency to be optimistic (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and a tendency to reappraise problems positively. Extraverts' generally sanguine temperament (e.g., Watson & Clark, 1992) may lead them to focus on the good and positive side of their experiences. In addition, extroversion tends to be associated with the use of rational, problem-solving coping strategies and with social-support seeking and positive reappraisal (Dorn & Matthews, 1992; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that some studies have shown a negative relationship between extraversion and burnout. More specifically, Eastburg, Williamson, Gorsuch, and Ridley (1994); Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004); Michielsen, Willemsen, Croon, De Vries, and Van Heck (2004); and Piedmont (1993) have found that extraversion is negatively associated with emotional

exhaustion. However, Zellars, Perrewe, and Hochwarter (2000) found that of the Big Five personality dimensions, only neuroticism significantly predicted emotional exhaustion in a sample of nurses working in a large American metropolitan hospital. Francis et al. and Zellars et al. have also found a negative association between extraversion and depersonalization. It is interesting that, as Buhler and Land (2003, p. 10) observed, contrary to much of the personality literature that has presented extraversion as a “psychoprotective” factor, a positive relationship between extraversion and two burnout variables (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) existed in a sample of intensive-care nursing staff. Buhler and Land, Deary et al. (1996), Eastburg et al., Francis et al., and Zellars et al. have consistently found a positive association between extraversion and personal accomplishment in the burnout literature. In addition, Eastburg and his colleagues found that extraverted nurses required more work-related peer support than did introverted ones to avoid emotional exhaustion. The tendency of extraverts to seek interactions with other people may also counteract processes of depersonalization. Indeed, Lingard (2003) reported social extraversion and action extraversion to be negatively associated with cynicism among civil engineers. Therefore, in the present study, we expected the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Extraversion will be negatively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and positively related to personal accomplishment.

Altruism, nurturance, and caring as opposed to hostility, indifference to others, self-centeredness, and noncompliance characterize *agreeableness*. There is some support for a modest relationship of agreeableness with social support (e.g., Hooker, Frazier, & Monahan, 1994; Vickers, Kolar, & Hervig, 1989; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). A high score on agreeableness may encompass our stereotype of the ideal nurse, that is, a sort of Florence Nightingale. The results of the few studies that concerned the relationship between agreeableness and burnout are consistent with this view. For example, Piedmont (1993; Study 1) showed that agreeableness correlates negatively with emotional exhaustion and positively with personal accomplishment. In a second study, Piedmont (Study 2) showed that, in completing a 7-month follow-up questionnaire, therapists who scored high on agreeableness were less likely to report feelings of emotional exhaustion and negative attitudes toward their clients. Consistently, Deary et al. (1996) reported that agreeableness is negatively related to depersonalization. However, they found no relationship between agreeableness on the one hand and emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment on the other hand. Zellars et al. (2000) reported similar results and found an admittedly weak negative relationship between agreeableness and depersonalization and no relationship between agreeableness and the two other burnout variables. Further, Deary, Watson, and Hogston (2003), in their longitudinal study of nursing students, noted that agree-

ableness at Time 1 was significantly related to depersonalization at Time 2, although this relationship was reduced to nonsignificance at Time 3 because of the smaller number of participants. On the basis of these findings, in the present study we predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Agreeableness will be negatively associated with burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment).

Researchers (e.g., Watson & Hubbard, 1996) have consistently associated *conscientiousness* with problem-solving coping, probably because of the persistency characteristic of individuals high in this trait. Moreover, Costa, McCrae, and Dye (1991) and McCrae and Costa (1986) have associated conscientiousness with self-discipline, achievement striving, dutifulness, and competence. The conscientious individual's persistency and self-discipline will probably also cause him or her to finish tasks and to accomplish things. Indeed, Piedmont (1993), Deary et al. (1996), and Deary et al. (2003) have found a positive relationship between conscientiousness and personal accomplishment. Although Deary et al. (1996) and Piedmont have noted no relationship with the other burnout dimensions, Deary et al.'s (2003) longitudinal analysis of burnout in nursing students indicated a positive relationship between conscientiousness and depersonalization. LePine, LePine, and Jackson (2004) found a negative association between conscientiousness and emotional exhaustion. However, Witt, Andrews, and Carlson (2004) observed that the performance of call center operators in terms of volumes of calls that they answered was worse only among conscientious workers who reported feeling emotionally exhausted. The performance of emotionally exhausted workers who were low in conscientiousness was unaffected. In the present study, we predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be a positive relationship between conscientiousness and personal accomplishment.

Researchers (e.g., Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) have related burnout to emotional stability or neuroticism more frequently than to any of the rest of the Big Five factors of personality. A tendency to experience negative, distressing emotions and to possess associated behavioral and cognitive traits characterizes neuroticism. Among the traits that classify this dimension are fearfulness, irritability, low self-esteem, social anxiety, poor inhibition of impulses, and helplessness (Costa & McCrae, 1987). In general, individuals who are high in neuroticism tend to set extremely high goals for themselves and tend to underestimate their own performance (Eysenck, 1947). Bolger (1990) and Heppner, Cook, Wright, and Johnson (1995) have associated neuroticism with the use of ineffective coping strategies. People high in neuroticism seem to use avoiding and distracting coping strategies—such as denying, wishful thinking, and self-criticism—rather than more approaching strategies—such as problem solving and proactive behavior

(Bolger; McCrae & Costa, 1986). Moreover, neuroticism seems to be associated with strong emotional reactions to stressful situations, eventually leading to physical illness (Van Heck, 1997), and with a higher risk of the development of psychopathology (Widiger & Trull, 1992).

Researchers (e.g., Deary et al., 1996; Hills & Norvell, 1991; LePine et al., 2004; Lingard, 2003; Zellars et al., 2000) on the relationship between neuroticism and burnout have typically shown that individuals who are high in neuroticism are more likely to report feelings of emotional exhaustion, to report lower levels of personal achievement, and—if health care providers—to dehumanize their patients (depersonalization). In a recent study of intensive-care nursing staff, Buhler and Land (2003) found that individuals who were higher in neuroticism experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. However, although Deary et al. (2003) noted a significant association between neuroticism at Time 1 and emotional exhaustion at Time 2, the association did not hold at Time 3 among nursing students. Further, a longitudinal study of employment service case managers indicated a significant positive relationship between neuroticism and depersonalization; emotional exhaustion completely mediated the relationship (Goddard, Patton, & Creed, 2004). In a study of 234 highway patrol officers, Hills and Norvell found not only that neuroticism was highly correlated with burnout but also that it moderated the detrimental impact of daily hassles. Francis et al. (2004) recently observed a significant negative relationship between neuroticism and personal accomplishment in a study of burnout in Roman Catholic parochial clergy in England and Wales. In the present study, we predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 4:* Negative relationships will exist between neuroticism and all three burnout dimensions.

Finally, the intelligence and curiosity that are associated with the fifth factor, intellect/autonomy, may be associated with a tendency to try to learn something valuable from taxing experiences in terms of, for example, personal growth or other positive outcomes (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990). Intellect is largely unrelated to coping but appears to reflect a more flexible, imaginative, and intellectually curious approach in dealing with stressful situations (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). In addition, openness to experience has been related to the use of humor as a way of dealing with stress (McCrae & Costa, 1986). Smith and Williams (1992) argued that Factor V may be associated with stress reduction because situations are appraised as less threatening by individuals who score high on this factor. As far as we know, only a few studies exist in which the authors relate the factor intellect/autonomy to burnout. Deary et al. (1996) found a modest but significant positive relationship between openness and personal accomplishment. Zellars et al. (2000) also reported a positive relationship between openness and personal accomplishment and in addition

found a negative relationship between openness and depersonalization. But Deary et al. (2003) noted that nurses with more open personalities were more likely to be emotionally exhausted. On the other hand, Michielsen et al. (2004) found through structural equation modeling that emotional exhaustion was predicted by hardiness only and none of the Big Five personality variables (including openness) in a sample of Dutch workers. Similarly, Piedmont (1993) reported nonsignificant relationships between openness and the three burnout dimensions. Therefore, in the present study, we expected no relationship between intellect/autonomy and burnout.

### **Personality, Stress, and Burnout**

Modelers of the relationship between dispositional and social-psychological variables (e.g., social support) usually consider either main effects or buffer effects of these variables on well-being (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985). Main effects of personality could occur because certain personality types have a tendency to develop the symptoms typically associated with burnout. Buffer effects occur when individual differences in burnout reflect differential reactions to stressful situations, that is, when some personalities react with exaggerated emotional reactions when confronted with stressful situations as compared to other personalities. Because burnout is typically associated with characteristics of the working environment, in the present study we regarded a buffering hypothesis most plausible. We predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 5:* The relationships between extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability on the one hand and the three burnout dimensions on the other hand will be strongest under stressful circumstances. Under low-stress circumstances, no such relationship will occur.

The consideration of buffer effects rather than main effects has a methodological advantage. Researchers may criticize studies relating personality to burnout for reasons of common method variance. Items for measuring burnout may strongly resemble items from a personality scale (e.g., “I can easily empathize with my clients” versus “empathizes with others”), resulting in artificially high correlations between the constructs. However, such a methodological confound cannot account for a differential relationship between personality and burnout under low and high stress conditions.

In sum, in the present study we predicted relationships of neuroticism, agreeableness, and extraversion with each of the three burnout dimensions. In addition, we expected conscientiousness to correlate positively with personal accomplishment. Finally, we predicted that the relationship between personality and burnout would be stronger among volunteer caregivers who have had a relatively high number of negative experiences than among volunteers who have had little or no such experiences.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in the present study were Dutch volunteer counselors who worked with terminally ill patients. The sample included 75 female volunteers and 5 male volunteers, with a mean age of 54 years ( $SD = 10.3$  years). The participants worked an average of 8 hours per week as a volunteer counselor, and the average length of experience in this work was 3 years. Of the participants, 13% mentioned volunteer work as their main activity, 47% were also engaged in homemaking, 21% had a paid job, 16% were retired, 5% were unemployed, 3% received disability pensions, and 1% was studying. Of the patients with whom the volunteers were working at the time of the study, 56% were women, and 44% were men. The patients' age distribution was as follows: 11% were younger than 50 years, 38% were between 51 years and 70 years, and 51% were between 70 years and 100 years.

### *Procedure*

We recruited volunteer counselors by a mailing. This mailing included some background information about the aims of the study and an invitation to participate in a study on "health care and well-being." Of the 206 volunteers who were approached, 80 expressed their willingness to participate in the study (response = 39%). Two research assistants visited them at home. The assistants provided a questionnaire that included measures of burnout and personality and open-ended questions regarding positive and negative experiences with patients. After we analyzed the data, all participants who had indicated that they were interested in the results of the present study received a summary of the main research findings.

### *Measures*

*Personality.* We used the Five Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI; Hendriks, 1997; Hendriks, Hofstee, De Raad, & Angleiter, 1999) to measure the Big Five personality dimensions. The FFPI is a 100-item questionnaire with scales for the five factors labeled as *Extraversion* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ), *Agreeableness* ( $\alpha = .80$ ), *Conscientiousness* ( $\alpha = .79$ ), *Emotional Stability* ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and *Autonomy* ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Respondents could give their answers on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *not at all applicable* to 5 = *totally applicable*. Each scale contains 10 items for the positive pole of a factor (e.g., "Takes risks" for Autonomy) and 10 items for the negative pole of a factor (e.g., "Prefers to be alone" for Extraversion [recoded]). After computing standardized scale scores, we applied weights to find orthogonal factor scores. We mirrored scores for emotional stability and will further refer to them as *neuroticism*.

*Burnout.* We measured burnout using a Dutch translation (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 2000) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Several studies have shown that this questionnaire has good psychometric properties. Specifically, Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) have reported support for its reliability and three-factor structure across occupations, nationalities (including The Netherlands), and versions of the MBI. We slightly adjusted the questionnaire to make it suitable for the work of the volunteer counselors in the present study. The scale includes the three original subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. We measured emotional exhaustion with nine items, for example, "I feel emotionally drained from caring for my client." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .87. We measured the second burnout dimension, depersonalization, with five items, for example, "Sometimes I think that I don't really care what happens to my client." The moderate internal consistency that we found for this burnout scale ( $\alpha = .61$ ) is not uncommon in burnout research. Finally, we measured personal accomplishment with eight items, for example, "I have accomplished many valuable things by caring for my client" ( $\alpha = .77$ ). We scored all items on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 0 = *never* to 6 = *every day*. High levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and a low level of personal accomplishment are indicative of burnout.

*Positive and negative experiences with patients.* To gain an insight into the stressful aspects of volunteer counseling, we asked participants through two open questions to write down as many positive and negative experiences with patients as they could remember. Examples of positive experiences were, "My patients are grateful and show appreciation" and "My patient is 96 years old. We have many interesting conversations, and this adds something valuable to my life." Examples of negative experiences were, "Some families are so ungrateful. It hurts that they do not appreciate the fact that I am doing this work on a voluntary basis" and "I had a patient with cancer, who wanted to talk with me. It was so painful to see that he was unable to talk . . ." We subtracted the total number of positive experiences from the total number of negative experiences, and the difference served as an indicator of stress (cf. Euwema, Kop, & Bakker, 2004).

### *Strategy of Analyses*

To test Hypotheses 1–4, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses with the personality factors as predictors and the burnout dimensions as the criterion variables. Furthermore, to test the hypothesis that negative experiences moderate the personality–burnout relationship (Hypothesis 5), we first subtracted the total number of positive experiences from the total number of negative experiences (cf. Euwema et al., 2004). We then used the resulting stress indicator to form two groups by a median-split procedure. To test our interaction

hypothesis (Hypothesis 5), we examined the significance of the difference between the correlation coefficients obtained for the two groups.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 shows (a) the means and standard deviations of the burnout variables and (b) the correlations between burnout and personality. It is important to note that the relationships between the total number of negative experiences and the Big Five personality factors were all nonsignificant. For the total number of positive experiences, only the relationship with conscientiousness reached significance,  $r = .23, p < .05$ . These null findings suggested that stress among volunteer counselors is not “in the eye of the beholder”; the relative number of stressful experiences with patients was unrelated to personality.

### *Regression Analyses of Burnout on the Big Five Personality Factors*

We predicted relationships between extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism with each of the three burnout dimensions (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4). In addition, in Hypothesis 3 we stated that conscientiousness would be positively related to personal accomplishment. To test these hypotheses, we regressed the burnout dimensions on the Big Five personality factors.

*Emotional exhaustion.* To examine the relationship between personality and burnout, we first conducted a stepwise regression analysis with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and autonomy as the predictor variables and emotional exhaustion as the criterion variable. The results showed that neuroticism was the sole predictor of feelings of exhaustion,  $\beta = .36, p < .001$ . This predictor accounted for 13% of the variance in feelings of exhaustion, which was highly significant,  $F(5, 75) = 11.81, p < .001$ .

*Depersonalization.* In a second stepwise regression analysis, we regressed depersonalization on the five personality factors. Three personality factors accounted for 17% of the variance in depersonalization, which was significant,  $F(5, 75) = 5.21, p < .01$ . Neuroticism,  $\beta = .32, p < .01$ ; extraversion,  $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ; and autonomy,  $\beta = -.22, p < .05$ , all demonstrated significant effects on depersonalization. Thus, volunteer counselors had more negative attitudes toward their patients when they were less emotionally stable, more introverted, and less autonomous.

*Personal accomplishment.* We performed the third regression analysis using the five personality factors as predictors and personal accomplishment as the criterion

**TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of the Three Burnout Dimensions and the Big Five Personality Factors, *N* = 80**

Dimension	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	I	II	III	IV	V
Emotional exhaustion	10.19	0.07	-.01	-.05	.10	.36**	-.08
Depersonalization	2.95	2.55	-.20*	-.15	.08	.26**	-.23*
Personal accomplishment	33.60	5.08	.35**	.25*	-.01	-.17	.17

*Note.* I = Extraversion; II = Agreeableness; III = Conscientiousness; IV = Neuroticism; V = Autonomy.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

variable. The results of this analysis indicated that both extraversion,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ , and neuroticism,  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ , are independent and significant predictors of this burnout dimension. These two personality factors accounted for 19% of the variance in personal accomplishment, a highly significant effect,  $F(5, 75) = 8.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, particularly those who are extraverted and emotionally stable experience feelings of competence in their work.

Together, these findings lent most support to Hypothesis 4: Neuroticism was related to each of the three burnout dimensions. In addition, the findings partially supported Hypothesis 1: Extraversion was negatively related to depersonalization and positively related to personal accomplishment. The findings contradicted Hypotheses 2 and 3, which we then rejected.

### *Negative Experiences as a Moderator of the Personality-Burnout Relationship*

We further hypothesized that the relationship between personality and burnout would be stronger for those volunteers with a relatively high number of negative experiences with patients than for those volunteers with only a few negative experiences (Hypothesis 5). To test this hypothesis, we examined the significance of the difference between the correlation coefficients for the group with few versus many negative experiences. Z tests on the Fisher-transformed values of the correlations showed that 6 of the 15 pairs of correlations differed significantly at the  $p < .05$  level. First, as shown in Table 2, the positive relationships between neuroticism on the one hand and the three burnout dimensions on the other hand were significant only among volunteers with a relatively high number of negative experiences with patients. For volunteers with only a few such experiences, the correlations reduced to nonsignificance. It is interesting that a significant negative correlation between agreeableness and depersonalization,  $r = -.29$ ,  $p < .05$ , and a significant positive correlation between agreeableness and personal accomplishment,  $r = .38$ ,  $p < .01$ , were found among volunteers with many negative experiences. For volunteers with no such experiences, these relationships reduced to nonsignificance. These findings showed that the predicted relationship between agreeableness and burnout existed, but solely under stressful circumstances. Finally, we found the correlation between extraversion and emotional exhaustion and the correlation between conscientiousness and personal accomplishment to differ significantly for volunteers with a few negative experiences versus many negative experiences, but the raw correlations failed to reach the significance level. In conclusion, the results partially supported Hypothesis 5.

## **Discussion**

Research on the relationship between personality and burnout has been rather fragmentary and incomplete. The present study is one of the first in which researchers examined this relationship systematically by using an integral model

**TABLE 2. Correlations Between the Three Burnout Dimensions and Personality for Volunteer Counselors With a Few Versus Many Negative Experiences With Patients**

Variable	Few negative experiences	Many negative experiences	z test
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>			
Extraversion	-.15	.16	1.86*
Agreeableness	-.09	-.05	< 1
Conscientiousness	.03	.15	< 1
Neuroticism	.05	.56***	-3.48***
Autonomy	.00	-.03	< 1
<i>Depersonalization</i>			
Extraversion	-.26	-.09	1.06
Agreeableness	.00	-.29*	-1.79*
Conscientiousness	.05	.14	< 1
Neuroticism	.06	.35*	-1.83*
Autonomy	-.12	-.24	< 1
<i>Personal accomplishment</i>			
Extraversion	.40**	.31*	< 1
Agreeableness	.08	.38**	1.92*
Conscientiousness	.20	-.24	-2.69**
Neuroticism	-.09	-.28*	1.19
Autonomy	.21	.13	< 1

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

of personality that was based on the Big Five. Although the small sample size does not allow strong conclusions, a few findings are particularly noteworthy. First, despite the small sample, we found significant and meaningful relationships for each of the three burnout dimensions. Neuroticism and extraversion appeared to be the most consistent predictors of burnout. A tendency to underestimate self-performance (Eysenck, 1947) and a tendency to react with strong emotions and self-criticism in stressful situations (Bolger, 1990; Heppner et al., 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Van Heck, 1997) seem to be associated with a higher vulnerability to all symptoms of burnout among individuals high in neuroticism. The tendency to engage in intense personal interactions among extraverts may counteract depersonalization, whereas their optimism and self-confidence (Costa & McCrae, 1992) are expressed in increased feelings of personal accomplishment. It is interesting that N- and E+ exactly encompass the healthy personality type in

Grossarth-Marticek and Eysenck's (1990) classification of disease-prone personalities. A finding of the present study that we did not expect was that feelings of depersonalization were also negatively related to autonomy.

Of special interest is the present finding that a positive relationship between neuroticism and burnout existed among volunteers with many negative experiences but not among volunteers with few such experiences. This finding is consistent with our prediction that individual differences in relation to burnout do not reflect an inborn tendency to develop the symptoms typically associated with burnout but rather differential reactions to stressful situations. In other words, certain individuals may be more capable of adapting to stressful conditions and of returning quickly to their original levels of well-being than others (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987; McCrae & Costa, 1988; Piedmont, 1993). Individuals who are high in neuroticism may show more emotional reactions whenever confronted with stressful situations (Van Heck, 1997). Moreover, they seem to use avoiding and distracting coping strategies, such as denying, wishful thinking, and self-criticism, rather than more approaching strategies (Bolger, 1990; Heppner et al., 1995; McCrae & Costa, 1986). Ineffective coping with stressful situations in the work environment makes individuals who are high in neuroticism more vulnerable to the symptoms that are typically associated with burnout. The present findings are consistent with a study by Hills and Norvell (1991) on burnout that showed that neuroticism moderated the detrimental impact of daily hassles. Note, however, that the present study only partially supported our buffer hypothesis (Hypothesis 5) with respect to the relationship between personality and burnout. We found the same supporting results that we obtained for neuroticism for agreeableness too but not for the other dimensions that appeared as unique predictors in the regression analyses (i.e., extraversion and autonomy).

Finally, extraversion and agreeableness particularly correlated positively with personal accomplishment when volunteers were confronted with many stressful experiences. These findings are consistent with the conservation of resources theory of Hobfoll (2002), who argued that a resource (or resource gain) in itself has only a modest effect but instead acquires its saliency in the context of resource loss (e.g., under conditions of high job demands). Riolli and Savicki (2003) found conceptually similar effects and showed that information service workers' personal resources (optimism and control coping) were particularly beneficial when their work resources were low.

### *Limitations*

It is clear that we must note limitations of the present study too. First, because of the small sample size, the present study had only limited power. In addition, the response rate, although similar to what is common in mail surveys, was relatively low. It is possible that those who did not respond are those with higher scores on burnout, who perceived the questionnaire as an additional bur-

den. Second, although the volunteer counselors were able to give examples of negative experiences, their positive experiences clearly outnumbered the negative ones. Consistently, their levels of burnout were relatively low. Feelings of being useful to others, the rewarding social interactions that are associated with the work, and the social approval of volunteer work (Frisch & Gerrard, 1981; Morrow-Howell & Mui, 1989; Pearce, 1983) may have affected the present sample. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the low levels of burnout probably did not result in inflated outcomes. Particularly for the moderation effects, the absence of extreme scores on the stress-indicator (i.e., the total number of negative experiences minus the total number of positive experiences) and the reduced dispersion in burnout scores may have indicated a rather conservative test of our hypotheses.

A third limitation concerns the fact that all indicators in the present study—personality, burnout, and the presence of stressors—relied on self-report. As Watson and Pennebaker (1989) showed, measures of stress are highly correlated with neuroticism and negative affectivity, indicating that individuals who are high in neuroticism are more likely to report high levels of stress and probably also high levels of burnout. It is interesting that, in the present study, the number of negative experiences that the volunteers reported was unrelated to neuroticism. Moreover, a methodological confound cannot account for the differential relationship between neuroticism and burnout under low- and high-stress conditions. Still, because the present results were cross-sectional, it is not possible to assess the extent to which levels of neuroticism were affected by working conditions (e.g., high demands, low control, and low support), as assessed in other research (Dollard & Winefield, 1998).

### *Practical Implications*

The present study's practical implications for volunteering are straightforward. First, the present results show that certain personality traits may act as burnout buffers against known risk factors in human service work. For example, the present study indicates that individuals who are high in extraversion and low in neuroticism may be particularly well suited to volunteer positions within the human services area. Better selection could help match people to positions. Moreover, in the counseling and training of human service volunteers, individuals who are high in neuroticism and low in extraversion deserve special attention. Several studies have shown the effectiveness of training programs in reducing burnout (for an overview, see Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), and individuals at risk for developing burnout particularly may benefit from intensive, well-structured programs for improving their coping skills in dealing with stressful work situations and in reducing their negative emotional responses to such situations.

The potential effects of burnout are considerable for individual volunteers, the organizations within which they work, and the broader community. Volun-

teers play an integral role in the functioning of “third sector” organizations. The recent focus on economic rationalist policies has seen this sector grow to become an economic force that is increasingly and inextricably linked to the public and private sectors with both financial and social implications (Jamrozik, 1996). Because of the limited pool of volunteers and the increasing economic and social benefits that the volunteer sector provides to the community, it is important for the community and the third-sector organizations to focus on retaining volunteer workforces through attention to their psychological welfare, selection, training, and management (Ross et al., 1999) and to appropriate job design to reduce many of the known risk factors (e.g., excessive case load).

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