Is meaningful work the silver bullet? Perspectives of the social workers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of meaningful work against dimensions of job burnout, with psychological capital (PsyCap) as the mediator.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from 223 social workers were analyzed using the partial least squares-structural equation modeling.

Findings – As expected, meaningful work displayed a positive, direct and significant relationship with PsyCap. Contrary to expectations, meaningful work did not establish a negative direct relationship with all, but one dimension of job burnout. However, the results showed that it had indirect relationships with all job burnout dimensions through PsyCap where it displayed a mediating influence over the relationship.

Practical implications – Given the malleable attributes of PsyCap and the results showing meaningful work being a strong predictor of PsyCap, this study suggests that organizations should focus on imbuing greater meaningfulness in work to improve social workers’ PsyCap, which is essential in reducing their propensity for experiencing job burnout.

Originality/value – This is one of the first studies to explore in detail the effects of meaningful work on the dimensions of job burnout, with PsyCap being the mediator. This study has advanced the body of knowledge on meaningful work by contesting the claim that meaningful work was an effective predictor in reducing job burnout. In addition, this study has extended the understanding of the upward-spiral concept and the resource caravan concept.

Keywords Meaningful work, Psychological Capital, Social workers, Job burnout

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Bolstered by the belief that a happy employee is one that delivers a return on investment, many organizations today are constantly looking at their employees’ well-being to improve performance and productivity. On average, an organization could expect a three to five dollar return for every dollar of investment in employee well-being (Rath and Harter, 2010). With its intuitive appeal and burgeoning research, meaningful work promises to be “the next big thing that organizations should leverage on to improve performance” (Steger, 2017, p. 60). It is for these reasons that scholars such as Steger (2017) have advocated that organizations should move “beyond engagement and commitment and strive for meaningful work” (p. 60).

It has been established over the past decade that employees experiencing meaningful work are more likely to manifest desired behavior. For instance, they reported higher levels of well-being (Arnold et al., 2007), positivity in emotions (Steger et al., 2013), as well as being more satisfied with life (Allan et al., 2016a). Other benefits include lower propensity of facing burnout (Creed et al., 2014), higher job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2018), clarity of career aspirations (Steger and Dik, 2010), enhanced organizational commitment (Jung and Yoon, 2016), lower intentions of resigning (Fairlie, 2011) and superior work performance...
(Tong, 2018). Similarly, industry reports have demonstrated the growing importance of meaningful work among employees. For instance, the Asian Millennium Workforce and the Travel Industry survey have shown that almost half of the respondents agreed meaningful work was a key driver for employee engagement and connection, and 20 per cent of the respondents were prepared to accept a lower salary in exchange for more meaningful work (McKinsey, 2014). Another global survey showed that 73 per cent of 23,000 respondents indicated the ability to find a greater purpose in work helped them in achieving job satisfaction (LinkedIn, 2016).

Despite the growing research, gaps remain. First, research to date focused on the effect of meaningful work within for-profit settings (Nawrin, 2018; Vidwans and Raghvendra, 2016; Jung and Yoon, 2016). Little is known about the effects of meaningful work in non-profit organizations (NPOs). Considering that many employees working in NPOs are driven by its altruistic mission, Park et al. (2018) have highlighted the source of their motivation might be distinct, as they work in a unique organizational context and operate with fewer resources compared to for-profit organizations. Therefore, we argue that the direct application of findings obtained from past studies focusing on for-profit organizations might not be applicable.

Second, studies examining the effects of meaningful work on respective dimensions of job burnout are conspicuously missing. Job burnout is a common phenomenon that happens to all professions including nurses (Ang et al., 2016), educators (Arens and Morin, 2016), health workers (Dreison et al., 2016), church ministers (Buys and Rothmann, 2010), students (Chang et al., 2015), hospitality staff (Chiang and Liu, 2017), physical instructors (Clapper and Harris, 2008), social workers (Travis et al., 2016) and civil servants (Hao et al., 2015). While Fairlie (2011) showed that meaningful work could address job burnout, other studies have revealed differentiated effects from the same predictor could be observed across the dimensions of job burnout (Bakker et al., 2000; Roncalli and Byrne, 2016). In addition, Lizano’s (2015) systematic review of 19 studies found all but two observed differential impacts on job burnout dimensions. The inconsistency in the findings necessitates further investigation on the effects of a singular unique predictor on the dimensions of job burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) have pointed out the importance of having a separate examination of the burnout dimensions, which by having a composite score might mask nuanced interrelationships between the various burnout dimensions and the predictor. Taken together, this study extends the body of knowledge of meaningful work on the dimensions of job burnout, which earlier studies did not provide for.

Finally, several lines of inquiry (Isaksen, 2000) have suggested individual personalities, such as psychological capital (PsyCap), may affect the construction and deconstruction of one’s perception of work, which can influence the magnitude of outcomes. However, this hypothesis has not been widely tested. While many of the existing studies have examined how job, organizational and societal levels may affect individuals’ perception of work (Allan et al., 2016b), it is ultimately, the person and the environment that influence the degree of meaningful work in an organization. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of meaningful work by establishing if and how PsyCap affects the relationship between meaningful work and the dimensions of job burnout.

Putting these gaps together, this study unravels the complexity of meaningful work and its effectiveness in addressing job burnout. This study has responded to the issue raised by Breninkmeijer and VanYperen (2003) to analyze job burnout as a multidimensional construct. By incorporating PsyCap, this study explores in depth the relationship between a job and personal resources. In the process, it makes theoretical contributions by examining the gain spiral concept and reaffirming on the necessity of setting up a resource caravan as advocated by Hobfoll (2014) within organizations. Finally, it responds to Bakker and Demerouti’s (2017) call to further test the effects personal resources have on job demands.
Theoretical framework

Job demands - resources theory and conservation of resources theory

The theory and research into meaningful work and PsyCap, against dimensions of job burnout has pointed towards the relevance of individuals leveraging these resources to mitigate the negative effects arising from work. On this premise, we argue that the conservation of resources (COR) theory and the job demands–resources (JD-R) theory are particularly relevant to this study. The JD-R theory is widely used as an organizational framework in explaining the role of job characteristics in affecting job burnout. The robustness of the theory has been widely supported across both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Alarcon, 2011; Crawford et al., 2010; Lizano and Mor Barak, 2015). The key tenant within the JD-R theory spotlights the imbalance in either one of them, with excessive demands or insufficient resources will trigger a health impairment process, causing an individual to experience feeling emotionally exhausted, cynical and discrediting all former accomplishments (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Similarly, the presence of resources or the absence of strains provide individuals with the motivation to fulfill their work requirements (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Attracted by the motivational properties inherent in resources, the COR theory suggests that individuals are constantly seeking to retain and build on their resources to mitigate the effects against stress (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Hobfoll (2011) further clarified that resources are “objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources” (p. 339) and stress occurs when individuals perceive a potential loss in their resource (Hobfoll, 2011). To manage stress, individuals would “either be using the residual resources to restore loss or obtain new resources or withdrawing their efforts to conserve resources” (Montani et al., 2018, p. 124). Within the COR theory, the key principles of gain spiral and resource caravans are of relevance to this study. The principle of gain spiral explains the mutual generation of resources where the presence of one resource will foster the development of another resource, leading to the creation of a resource caravan that is a “collective pool of resources available within that organisational ecology, and individuals’ and groups’ ability to access those resources” (Hobfoll, 2011, p. 118). A resource caravan will address the requirements for homeostatic regulation, allowing employees facing job demands to select a matching resource in managing it.

In line with both theories, this study suggests that individuals who experience high job demands run the risk of experiencing one or more dimensions of job burnout. Therefore, individuals would use the advantage of the resource of meaningful work to gain new resources such as the enhancement of an individual’s PsyCap. These theories aligned with the concepts of gain spiral as well as the resource caravan, which states that resources do not exist in isolation but have the capacity to generate more resources improving one’s emotional well-being.

Literature review

Meaningful work and dimensions of job burnout

Work has been a central focus in one’s life. Individuals spend the majority of the time in their work, which according to Rosso et al. (2010), is also the environment where one finds one’s identity, purpose and sense of belonging. While not many would stop and think if their work was meaningful, many scholars still maintain the view that meaningful work is something everyone strives to achieve at a certain point of time (Hoole and Bonnema, 2015). This is because work possesses the motivational potential for achieving self-actualization, which every individual aspires to attain and every employer hopes to leverage on (Pratt et al., 2013). This reflects the complex and multi-dimensional construct of meaningful work that has been conceptualized by various scholars such as Steger et al. (2012) and Lips-
From the various definitions observed, meaningful work is more than the simple execution of tasks. It is a phenomenon where individuals transcend their individual concerns and focus more on issues outside themselves, as they accept a greater purpose in their lives through engagement with their work.

For social workers, the work they perform carries a special meaning. Reports have shown the vast majority enjoyed their work with a sense of fulfillment as the key reason keeping them in their profession (Murray, 2015). However, it is noted that they are highly susceptible to burnout (McFadden et al., 2018; McFadden, 2015). Recent articles from Ireland (Murray, 2017), Canada (The Chronicle Herald, 2017) and the USA (Torpey, 2018) highlighted that a key reason of social workers leaving the profession was because of emotional burnout. These elucidated that job burnout among social workers is not restricted to specific countries but is a widespread phenomenon requiring greater attention. These contradicted other claims (Fairlie, 2011) that meaningful work was an effective predictor of job burnout, which this study will examine in greater detail.

Maslach et al. (2001) described job burnout as conditions where individuals display a lack of mental energy, a negative working attitude, cynicism toward stakeholders and discrediting one’s previous achievements. The literature argued that job burnout is a manifestation of accumulated job demands, and most of the interventions have focused on providing various resources to facilitate the reduction of job demands for employees (Ahola et al., 2017; Bakker et al., 2005; Cole et al., 2012). Yet, there has been a constant discourse on whether job burnout should be treated as a unidimensional or a multi-dimensional construct.

The arguments for embracing a multi-dimensional construct is anchored against the point that each dimension is independent of one another and reporting as a unidimensional construct represents a loss of information (Van Dierendonck et al., 2001; Koesk and Koesk, 1989). Conversely, proponents of a unidimensional construct maintain that reporting as a single score provides an overall view of understanding the effect of job burnout within the model (Brenninkmeijer and VanYperen, 2003). However, it was theorized that burnout happens in a sequential progression with single dimension precipitating to the next (Golembiewski, 1999), others claimed it could happen simultaneously but independently (Maslach, 1993). From this review of the literature, experiencing burnout does not necessarily require the occurrence of three dimensions. Considering the complex and dynamic nature of job burnout, interventions to alleviate job burnout must be calibrated carefully to address the unique characteristics of each dimension. Given the inconsistencies in the findings where social workers, despite finding their work meaningful, continue to experience job burnout, this study examines in detail, if meaningful work can effectively address the different dimensions of job burnout. The first set of hypotheses is:

- **H1a.** Meaningful work negatively influences depersonalization.
- **H1b.** Meaningful work negatively influences emotional exhaustion.
- **H1c.** Meaningful work negatively influences reduced personal accomplishment.

**Meaningful work and psychological capital**

As part of positive psychology, Luthans et al. (2007) defined PsyCap as:

> [...] an individual’s positive psychological state of development that is characterized by (a) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (b) persevering towards goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; (c) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; and (d) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success (p. 542).
Among the various characteristics of PsyCap, one key attribute is its state of malleability. Being malleable means that PsyCap is non-state like and evolving, implying organizations could make use of these unique characteristics of PsyCap to enhance employees' efficiency, work performance and in strengthening their competitive advantage. In this regard, Srivastava and Maurya (2017) have argued work environments that “incorporate challenges, opportunities, flexibility, learning, recognition and growth” (Srivastava and Maurya, 2017, p. 226) supported the flourishing of PsyCap.

Additionally, Kahn and Fellows (2013) have argued that meaningful work supports the manifestation of these conditions. Meaningful work consists of foundational and relational attributes. Foundational attributes refer to the nature of the work role, while relational attributes focus on relationships with others (Kahn and Fellows, 2013). This aligns with other conceptualizations where meaningful work involves purpose and transcendent meaning (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). In sum, it appears that meaningful work is an ideal environment to develop employees’ PsyCap. Besides, this assumption aligns with the concept of the gain spiral where meaningful work might manifest positive emotions among employees, and as a result, trigger their PsyCap. The hypothesis regarding the nature of this relationship is posited as follows:

\[ H2. \text{ Meaningful work positively influences PsyCap.} \]

**Psychological capital and dimensions of job burnout**

PsyCap as a form of personal resource manifests desirable employee behaviors such as a higher level of job satisfaction, improved employee engagement and enhanced organizational commitment (Abbas et al., 2014; Luthans et al., 2007; Cheung et al., 2011). Siu et al. (2014) demonstrated that individuals with higher PsyCap displayed a lower propensity of turnover. Like employed individuals, PsyCap is a critical resource for unemployed individuals as well. Rani’s (2015) study on unemployed youths in India revealed that PsyCap has a significant positive relationship with psychological well-being. These views suggest that PsyCap is an important resource for individuals, as it provides them with hope, optimism and resilience in managing their job and daily livelihood demands.

Although PsyCap has proven to be a strong predictor against various job demands, little work has been done to examine PsyCap’s role against the respective dimensions of burnout. More current literature such as Fairlie (2011) and Cheung et al. (2011) have treated job burnout as a unidimensional construct. A seminal work by Bianchi et al. (2017) has spotlighted that “the three components of burnout are examined individually and the scores of each subscale are not combined into a single total score” (p. 3). Moreover, Roncalli and Byrne (2016) have found that rapport with coworkers had an inverse relationship with two burnout dimensions, which are emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but not with reducing personal accomplishments. Similar conclusions are drawn from Alacacioglu et al. (2009) where the effect on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are significantly higher for a younger group of respondents. Industry survey results corroborated with these views showing individuals could experience depersonalization and emotional exhaustion yet feeling proud of their accomplishments (McFadden, 2015). Drawing from all these, it shows that there is no one-size-fits-all intervention in addressing job burnout. Hence, there is a need to consider adopting differentiated interventions to effectively manage job burnout. Given there have been limited studies examining PsyCap on all dimensions of job burnout as a personal resource within the JD-R model, we, therefore, postulate the followings:

\[ H3a. \text{ PsyCap negatively influences depersonalization.} \]

\[ H3b. \text{ PsyCap negatively influences emotional exhaustion.} \]
PsyCap as the mediator

Anchoring against the COR theory and the JD-R theory, we have earlier argued and postulated that meaningful work positively influences PsyCap. At the same time, we hypothesized that PsyCap has had a negative influence over the dimensions of job burnout. Taken together, it was logical to assume PsyCap has acted as a mediator for the relationship between meaningful work and the dimensions of job burnout. This has been consistent with earlier studies where PsyCap was deployed as a mediator in several contexts such as occupational stress and job burnout (Li et al., 2015), human resource management practices and creativity (Gupta, 2014) and leadership and creativity (Gupta and Singh, 2014). In fact, this study has responded to Albrecht’s (2013) call to further explore the role of PsyCap as “psychological processes assumed to underlie the associations that have not been fully explored and have not been widely tested” (p. 245). Based on this discussion, the final set of hypotheses is:

H4a. PsyCap mediates the relationship between meaningful work and depersonalization.
H4b. PsyCap mediates the relationship between meaningful work and emotional exhaustion.
H4c. PsyCap mediates the relationship between meaningful work and reduced personal accomplishment.

Method

Research setting

Social work is a rewarding yet an emotionally charged profession. Social workers handle issues that many publics would want to avoid (Chiller and Crisp, 2012). They focus on individuals, families and societies in an effort to improve their social functioning and well-being (Truell, 2018). Social work is one of the fastest growing professions internationally. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimated a 16 per cent growth of social workers from 2016 to 2026 (BLS, 2016). While in Singapore, it has been estimated 3,000 new job opening in the social service sector across different professions could be expected from 2017 to 2019 (Tai, 2017).

Coupled with an ageing population, changing working norms and rising social expectations, social workers around the world have evolved from a dyadic client–worker mentality to become a macro-practitioner by assuming the role of a vehicle for change, and being an advocate for the community (Beckett, 2017). Social workers face ever-increasing job demands, leading to a resource deficit, with the inevitable consequence of feeling burnout, and eventually leaving the profession (Hombrados-Mendieta and Cosano-Rivas, 2013). With every departure, organizations suffer decreasing productivity and performance as the quality of care to clients is compromised, leading to a damaged reputation and a lack of goodwill (Welander et al., 2016). Despite advances in social work practices, there are relatively few studies that have examined the motivations and concerns of social workers (Kwok, 2017). This study is therefore timely, as the results may help organizations in developing more effective interventions to complement their existing recruitment, retention and motivation strategies.

Measures and analysis

Meaningful work was measured using the weighted and meaning inventory (WAMI) that is developed by Steger et al. (2012). WAMI is a 10-item instrument on a five-point Likert scale with “1” = “Absolutely Untrue” to “5” = “Absolutely True”. WAMI is widely adopted and
deployed across different contexts such as examining the relationship between meaningful work and one’s propensity of accepting lower salaries (Hu and Hirsh, 2017), positive disposition (Steger et al., 2013) and work stress (Allan et al., 2016a, 2016b). For this study, the composite reliability score for WAMI ranges from 0.79 to 0.86.

The psychological capital questionnaire (PCQ) was adopted to measure PsyCap. Developed by Luthans et al. (2007), PCQ measures PsyCap using a 24-item instrument on a six-point Likert scale of “1” = “Strongly Disagree” and “6” = “Strongly Agree”. The reasons for adopting PCQ are attributed to:

- PCQ is used in almost all studies on PsyCap (Avey et al., 2011).
- PCQ is developed based on established studies on the dimensions of hope (Snyder, 2002), efficacy (Parker, 1998), resilience (Wagnild and Young, 1993) and optimism (Scheier and Carver, 1985).
- PCQ is previously used beyond the context of employment, including mental health (Krasikova et al., 2015), group effectiveness among students (Vanno et al., 2015) and neurosciences (Peterson et al., 2008).

For this study, the composite reliability score for PCQ ranges from 0.81 to 0.86.

Job burnout was measured by the Maslach Burnout Index (MBI). The MBI is a 22-item survey, covering the three aspects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reducing personal achievement, over a seven-point Likert-scale with “0” = “Never” to “6” = “Everyday”. Developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981), MBI is considered as the “standard tool for research in this field and has been translated and validated in many languages” (Maslach and Leiter, 2016, p. 104). Owing to the reliability and validity of MBI, it is further developed to cater to different occupational groups, such as medical personnel, human services, educators and students. This customization, which is not seen in other instruments, allows more precise measurement of burnout (Koesk and Koesk, 1989). For this study, we adopted the MBI–Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS), which is designed for professionals in human services that focus on improving individual lives by providing guidance and preventing harm. This includes physicians, social workers, nurses and counselors. The composite reliability score for MBI-HSS ranges from 0.83 to 0.92.

Partial least squares–structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used as the analytical method as this study adopted a reflective-formative higher-order constructs model for the constructs of meaningful work and PsyCap. As highlighted by Finn and Wang (2014), erroneous measurement perspectives can lead to an “overestimation of the structural parameters for its effects and compromising on the content validity of the construct” (p. 2821). With covariance-based SEM not designed to handle formative constructs, the PLS-SEM was the ideal choice, as one of its notable strengths is its “capacity to handle formatively specified measurement models without limitation” (Ringle et al., 2018, p. 8). In addition, the PLS-SEM placed fewer restrictions on distribution normality and sample size requirements that allow it to reliably estimate complex models with few observations (Sarstedt et al., 2014).

Data collection

Through the assistance of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW), the web-based instrument was sent to its accredited members. A convenience sampling method was adopted, as the full list of SASW members was not made available for reasons of data privacy. An invitation was sent electronically and contained a uniform resource locator, which respondents used to access the web-based survey. It explained the purpose of the study as well as reassuring anonymity and confidentiality. Web-based survey was the best choice, as social workers are constantly out of the office attending to cases. Moreover, it
offered additional advantages such as convenience, allowing for variation in design and a shorter transmitting time (Fan and Yan, 2010).

Being the only association representing Singapore social workers, this survey was disseminated by SASW to their members, which Fan and Yan (2010) believed would result in a higher response rate. Two reminders were sent out subsequently. The contents of each reminder were customized to reflect the progress of data collection, at the same time, providing assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. These email reminders created a sense of urgency where respondents would put a higher priority on completing and returning the survey (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2012). In total, 223 responses were received over a five-month period. G*power analysis showed the minimum sample size required with three predictors, an effective size of 0.15 with a power of 80 per cent was 77. At 223 respondents, the power achieved was 99.9 per cent. With this, the PLS-SEM can be performed with the sample size of 223 respondents, as it had exceeded the required minimum number. There were no missing cases or incomplete data.

Results

Data preparation

Prior to the conduct of any analysis, we assessed the common method variance (CMV). The CMV is a form of systemic error variance shared by the constructs and may cause inflation and deflation of path coefficients, resulting in either Type I or Type II errors (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Kock, 2015). To reduce CMV, a temporal separation was created between the predictor and the criterion set of instruments with the insertion of questions on demographics. In addition, instruments of different scale endpoints were used to reduce “method biases caused by commonalities in scales and anchoring effects” (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p. 888). Finally, the assurance of anonymity, confidentiality and the reiteration of the importance of respondents’ honest responses were made at every available opportunity. Statistically, Harman’s single-factor test showed the largest factor explained 24.23 per cent of the variance, which was less than the threshold value of 50 per cent. (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This showed that the deployment of procedural remedies had diminished the risk of CMV biasing the results.

Descriptive analysis

Among the 223 respondents, 82.1 per cent were female and the remaining male. The majority ranged from 25 to 34 years old (34.5 per cent). More than half (57.8 per cent) had a bachelor’s degree as their highest qualification. In terms of years of experience, most of the respondents (41.3 per cent) had more than 10 years of experience. Table I reports the correlation matrix of this study.

Measurement model

The measurement model of first-order constructs was tested first. It involves assessing the convergent validity and the discriminant validity. The convergent validity assesses the degree of similarity between the indicators of the specific construct using the factor loadings, composite reliabilities (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2017). Table II shows the CR of all the constructs ranged from 0.793 to 0.922. The first-order constructs had achieved the required threshold value of 0.70, indicating a high level of internal consistency of the measures. Similarly, Table II demonstrates the AVE of all the constructs had achieved the required threshold value of 0.5. Most outer loading of the items exceeded the threshold value of 0.708, with a handful of them such as DP4, EX4 and EX8 falling short of it. They were retained as their respective CR and AVE exceeded the threshold value of 0.5 (Ramayah et al., 2018).
Table I: Correlation matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>1.942</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Education</td>
<td>2.780</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Years of experience</td>
<td>3.480</td>
<td>1.372</td>
<td>–0.109</td>
<td>0.181*</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Age</td>
<td>3.081</td>
<td>1.330</td>
<td>–0.207*</td>
<td>0.104*</td>
<td>0.175**</td>
<td>0.660**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Meaningful work</td>
<td>4.162</td>
<td>0.507</td>
<td>–0.068</td>
<td>–0.021</td>
<td>–0.004</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. PsyCap</td>
<td>4.606</td>
<td>0.532</td>
<td>–0.071</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.153*</td>
<td>0.198**</td>
<td>0.492**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>2.817</td>
<td>1.259</td>
<td>0.135*</td>
<td>–0.051</td>
<td>–0.179**</td>
<td>–0.194**</td>
<td>–0.342**</td>
<td>–0.560**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Depersonalization</td>
<td>1.504</td>
<td>1.111</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>–0.0965</td>
<td>–0.253**</td>
<td>–0.231**</td>
<td>–0.216**</td>
<td>–0.394**</td>
<td>0.622**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Reduced personal accomplishments</td>
<td>1.308</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>–0.065</td>
<td>–0.500**</td>
<td>–0.537**</td>
<td>0.347**</td>
<td>0.295**</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 223, aGender was coded as: 1 = male, 2 = female; bEducation was coded in categories: 0 = others, 1 = doctorate, 2 = master, 3 = bachelor, 4 = diploma; cYears of experience was coded in categories: 1 = less than 1 year, 2 = 1-3 years, 3 = 4-7 years, 4 = 8-10 years, 5 = more than 10 years; dAge was coded in categories: 1 = 18-24, 2 = 25-34, 3 = 35-44, 4 = 44-54 years, 5 = 55-64 years. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Discriminant validity is the degree of distinctiveness among the various constructs (Hair et al., 2017). Using the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) criterion, Table III shows the discriminant validity was achieved at HTMT0.90. Taking both tables together, the measurement model displayed internal consistency and reliability, as well as achieving convergent and discriminant validity.

Structural model

Before the structural model could be analyzed, a multi-collinearity assessment was administered through the variance inflation factor (VIF). Table IV shows the VIFs for each of the construct were below the cutoff value of 5.0, meaning that collinearity was not present between the constructs. From Table IV, surprisingly the results indicated meaningful work did not have any significant relationship with job burnout dimensions of depersonalization (H1a: β = 0.026, p = 0.375) or emotional exhaustion (H1b: β = −0.064, p = 0.163). However, the results did show meaningful work had a negative significant relationship with reduced personal accomplishment (H1c: β = −0.312, p < 0.001). Also, meaningful work was shown to have a positive significant relationship with PsyCap (H2: β = 0.522, p < 0.001). On the effectiveness of PsyCap as a predictor, results showed PsyCap had a negative significant relationship with all dimensions of job burnout, including depersonalization (H3a: β = −0.426, p < 0.001), emotional exhaustion (H3b: β = −0.564, p < 0.001) and reduced personal accomplishments (H3c: β = −0.399, p < 0.001). The results showed PsyCap had a mediating effect on the relationship between meaningful work and depersonalization (H4a: β = −0.222, p < 0.001), emotional exhaustion (H4b: β = −0.294, p < 0.001) and reduced personal accomplishments (H4c: β = −0.208, p < 0.001). Consequently, all hypotheses except H1a and H1b were supported. Figure 1 and Table IV summarize the results of the structural model.

Other than examining the significance of the hypothesized relationships, Table IV shows the coefficient of determination (R²), effect sizes (f²) and predictive relevance (Q²) of the model. The R² value showed that meaningful work and PsyCap explained 17.1 per cent of variances in depersonalization, 36.0 per cent of variances in emotional exhaustion, and 38.7 per cent of variances in reduced personal accomplishments. Cohen (1988) classified the R² value of depersonalization as a moderate model, while emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishments were substantial models. Similarly, meaningful work explained 27.2 per cent of variances in PsyCap, making it a substantial model. Table IV shows meaningful work had a negligible effect in producing the R² value for depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, which may explain its insignificant relationship. On the other hand, meaningful work displayed a small effect size in producing the R² value for reduced personal accomplishments, but a substantial effect size of 0.374 was found in producing the R² value for PsyCap. Meanwhile,
### Table II Measurement model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Outer loadings</th>
<th>Composite reliability</th>
<th>Average variance extracted (AVE)</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
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<td>EX6</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EX7</td>
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<td>EX8</td>
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<td>EX9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>PA8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive meaning at work</td>
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<td>MM3</td>
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<td>HO1</td>
<td>0.543</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HO3</td>
<td>0.669</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>HO4</td>
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<td>HO6</td>
<td>0.770</td>
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<td>Optimism</td>
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<td>OP1</td>
<td>0.745</td>
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<td>OP6</td>
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<td>Resilience</td>
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<td>RE1</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE6</td>
<td>0.679</td>
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</table>
PsyCap was observed to have produced moderate and substantial effects in producing $R^2$ value for dimensions of job burnout. Finally, the $Q^2$ values for all the exogeneous constructs were larger than zero, indicating they had predictive relevance for endogenous constructs.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship of meaningful work on dimensions of job burnout, with PsyCap as the mediator among social workers working in Singapore. The results reveal the overall positive appraisal of the work environment was significant in generating positive emotions, triggering an individual's PsyCap, a critical resource in influencing on one's well-being.

Contrary to our expectations, meaningful work has differential impact on the dimensions of job burnout. One possible reason could be social workers view their work as a “calling” and are aware of the meaningfulness their profession would manifest as well as the challenging environment that they would operate in. In other words, efforts to imbue meaningfulness into their work, when they already know “what was in it for them” would have a limited effect on social workers. For-profit organizations, on the other hand, would typically leverage the idea of meaningful work to invoke emotions such that it “optimizes occupational opportunities in such a way that employees’ motivation, effort and productivity are enhanced” (Steger, 2017, p. 71). In summary, this demonstrates that “what characterizes meaningful work tasks differs according to work context” (Vidman and Strömbärg, 2018, p. 117).

The results show social workers who perceive work as meaningful improved their sense of self-efficacy but did not reduce their emotional exhaustion or depersonalization. This may explain why social workers experience burnout despite finding meaning in their work. Of the dimensions, Bakker et al. (2000) claimed that the manifestation of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are due to the presence of job stressors, while reduced personal accomplishments was a manifestation of a lack of resources. The results aligned with Alarcon’s (2011) argument that resources had a stronger relationship with reduced personal accomplishments.

Concomitantly, the direct effect of PsyCap on various dimensions of job burnout suggests PsyCap is a key resource supporting social workers in navigating through their job demands in a positive manner and in the process, reducing their propensity for experiencing job burnout. This study's findings corroborate with other previous studies where PsyCap has contributed to an individual's well-being (Tüzün et al., 2018; Datu et al., 2018). The importance of PsyCap in social workers is further demonstrated from two
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Path coefficient</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>5.00%</th>
<th>95.00%</th>
<th>VIF</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>f²</th>
<th>Q²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1a</td>
<td>Meaningful work → Depersonalization</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.318 ( ^{\text{NS}} )</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.171</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1b</td>
<td>Meaningful work → Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>-0.064</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.982 ( ^{\text{NS}} )</td>
<td>-0.172</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1c</td>
<td>Meaningful work → Reduced personal accomplishment</td>
<td>-0.312</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>4.388 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.438</td>
<td>-0.200</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.387</td>
<td>0.115</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Meaningful work → PsyCap</td>
<td>0.522</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>9.032 ( ** )</td>
<td>0.408</td>
<td>0.602</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a</td>
<td>PsyCap → Depersonalization</td>
<td>-0.426</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>6.537 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.524</td>
<td>-0.311</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.194</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3b</td>
<td>PsyCap → Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>-0.564</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>9.641 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.655</td>
<td>-0.465</td>
<td>1.374</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3c</td>
<td>PsyCap → Reduced personal accomplishment</td>
<td>-0.399</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>5.926 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.506</td>
<td>-0.284</td>
<td>1.374</td>
<td>0.189</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4a</td>
<td>Meaningful work → PsyCap → Depersonalization</td>
<td>-0.222</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>5.355 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.292</td>
<td>-0.156</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4b</td>
<td>Meaningful work → PsyCap → Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>-0.294</td>
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<td>6.316 ( ** )</td>
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<td>-0.218</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4c</td>
<td>Meaningful work → PsyCap → Reduced personal accomplishment</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
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<td>5.071 ( ** )</td>
<td>-0.275</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: NS = not significant; \( ^{\ast} p < 0.05; ^{\ast\ast} p < 0.01; ^{\ast\ast\ast} p < 0.001 \)
additional perspectives. First, the results show that medium and substantial effect sizes were observed in producing the changes of $R^2$ values across the various dimensions of job burnout. Second, the results from mediation analysis reveal that meaningful work had an indirect effect on the dimensions of job burnout through PsyCap. These results align with findings from other settings where PsyCap was found to be an effective mediator (Moyer et al., 2017; Paek et al., 2015).

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. The first contribution made by this research lies in the effect of meaningful work against the dimensions of job burnout, with PsyCap as the mediator. Arguably, this seems to be the most important contribution by this study because of the absence of any existing literature examining the relationship between these variables within the same model. This study extended the findings of earlier studies, such as Peng et al. (2013), where they treated job burnout as a unidimensional construct. Such conceptualization of job burnout as a unidimensional construct has been questioned, as it “imply that individuals who suffer only from emotional exhaustion, only from depersonalization, or only from reduced personal accomplishment will be considered as suffering from the same condition, namely, ‘burnout,’ though they present with symptom profiles that are, by definition, different and potentially call for different management strategies” (Bianchi et al., 2017, p. 3).

Besides, research practices of adopting a composite score for burnout are inconsistent with Maslach et al. (1996) where they specifically mentioned that scores of each dimensions should be computed individually and should not be combined into one score. Following this line of argument, this study unravels fresh perspective that meaningful work alone is not a silver bullet in alleviating job burnout experienced by social workers. It shows that meaningful work, as a predictor, addresses only one out of the three dimensions. Evidently, the present result contrasts with previous studies such as Fairlie (2011) which suggest that meaningful work is an effective predictor in addressing job burnout.
This study shows that to address job burnout effectively, especially for individuals who are motivated by the inherent meaningfulness of the work, it requires a complementary resource, which this study revealed as PsyCap. The mediation finding further explains that PsyCap is a key resource in facilitating social workers to have a positive appraisal of their work environment. Though earlier studies such as Wright and Hobfoll (2004) attempted to identify the effect of personality resources to dimensions job burnout, they did not conceptualized personality resources as personality traits per se. Rather, Wright and Hobfoll (2004) operationalized personality resources as psychological well-being which uses the Berkman (1971) scale that measures respondents’ state of mental health (Sharma et al., 2013). From this perspective, we extend the understanding on the role of personal resources, in the form of PsyCap, demonstrating that PsyCap as a higher-order composite construct of hope, efficacy, resilience and self-efficacy that influences the experiences of job burnout in the emotionally demanding environment of social work.

Second, this study epitomizes the resource caravan concept nestled within the COR theory. The present findings extend Grover et al.’s (2018) results by providing conceptual clarity to specific job resource in the form of meaningful work. Our findings demonstrate that meaningful work, as a resource by itself, generates other resources. These results enrich the COR theory and specifically spotlighting on the importance of providing social workers with “more, preferably matching, resources that could make emotional job demands less stressful, and even stimulating and challenging” (De Jonge et al., 2008, p. 1461). In the same vein, the mutual generation of resources epitomizes the gain spiral concept postulated by Fredickson and Joiner (2002). This study also answered to Fredrickson and Joiner’s (2018) call to advance understanding of “reciprocal dynamics set in motion by people’s day-to-day experiences of positive emotions” (p. 198). The results demonstrate that the corollaries of how experiencing meaningfulness in their work broadens one’s behaviour that is beneficial to the workplace. In the process, it builds onto social workers’ psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism in managing their job demands better.

Responding to the call by Bakker and Demerouti (2017), this study has extended the understanding of the JD-R theory. As explained earlier, the JD-R theory traditionally focused mainly on the effect of job characteristics on job and personal outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Recent studies have gravitated toward the role of individual, as one possesses personal resources that bear impact on work outcomes and personal well-being (Grover et al., 2018). On this note, this study further provides conceptual clarity in demonstrating that PsyCap, as a personal resource, has played a similar role to job resource where it has mitigated against the undesirable effect of job demands.

Managerial implications

A key managerial implication lies in how PsyCap influences social workers’ views of their job demands and may reduce their propensity of experiencing job burnout. Given the growing importance of social workers, it seems reasonable for organizations to introduce interventions that enhance social workers’ awareness of the PsyCap dimensions of optimism, hope, resiliency and efficacy. This study has found that efforts to instill meaningfulness into their work had a substantial effect in influencing PsyCap. On this, Bailey and Madden (2016) have highlighted deriving meaning from work can be found in terms of organizational meaningfulness, job meaningfulness, task meaningfulness and interactional meaningfulness.

In line with the above, the following managerial recommendations are proposed. First, organizations should leverage on different medium channels to articulate clearly the broad purpose of the organization and how it intends on making a positive contribution to the society and environment. It is reported that unsatisfied and disengaged employees feel better of their work when they realize and are involved in activities that allow them in giving back to the society (Seppala, 2016).
In addition, we suggest organizations to initiate job-crafting exercises involving employees taking responsibility and leveraging on the unique knowledge they have of their job to proactively “redefine and reimagine their job designs in a more personally meaningful way” (Berg et al., 2013, p. 81). For instance, social workers can re-craft their job to include providing tuition to children of the clients, or to act as a counselor in providing emotional support to other social workers who are experiencing job burnout. Studies show that job crafting has had a positive influence on job satisfaction and work meaningfulness (Cenciotti et al., 2017; Berg et al., 2013).

Third, a supportive, respectful and inclusive work environment can be created for all social workers. Being an emotionally intense profession, providing an environment of meaningful vertical and lateral interactions allows social workers to provide and to receive feedback, both negative and positive. In turn, this promotes a work environment that supports effective communication on shared values and fosters a sense of belonging and appreciation (Bailey and Madden, 2016).

Finally, the importance of PsyCap demonstrated in this study implies that organizations should ensure social workers having sufficient PsyCap to manage their work demands. In this regard, Luthans et al. (2008) developed a web-based intervention program that have been shown to be effective in developing one’s PsyCap. Besides, having on the job training, positive support group, enrichment to job, better quality communication as well as introducing approaches such as improving one’s positive emotions and cognitive ability of social workers to manage work demands have been found to have a positive effect in building PsyCap (Youssef and Luthans, 2012). Beyond social workers, we suggest that organizations should focus on developing leaders’ PsyCap, which have been shown to have a direct influence on followers’ PsyCap (Chen et al., 2017). In sum, with efforts to cultivate and develop both leaders’ and social workers’ PsyCap, it will result in higher quality service to their clients.

Limitations and future research recommendations

The CMV is one of the limitations in studies using a cross-sectional design. Though procedural and statistical checks were implemented, one cannot preclude the possibility respondents might provide a socially desired response for this study. Future studies should use a longitudinal design to explore the causal effects between the variables. Second, the present findings focused on social workers working in Singapore. Considering the job demands faced by social workers in a developing country likely differ from one faced in a more developed country, future researchers could replicate this study to see if there are any differences across countries of practice. Hence, future researchers could consider using a mixed method approach in future studies. Although a quantitative method was sufficient in meeting the present study’s objectives, meaningful work nonetheless is a complex and perception-based experience. Adopting a mixed method approach would allow deeper insights into the subject matter and advance the body of knowledge. On the same note, studies such as Wright and Hobfoll (2004) have indicated that there could be potential relationships between the categorical variables of gender, age, education and experiences against the outcomes of this study, which future researchers can explore in details.

References


Vidman, Å. and Strömberg, A. (2018), “Well it is for their sake we are here”: meaningful work tasks from care workers’ view, Working with Older People (Brighton, England), Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 111-120.


Further reading


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