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Burnout and intersubjectivity: A psychoanalytical study from a Lacanian perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersubjective process connected with burnout. On the basis of qualitative research data we investigate to what extent Lacan's model of intersubjectivity enables us to understand the burnout process and to differentiate between people who suffer from burnout and those who do not. We first outline Lacan's theory of intersubjectivity through a discussion of the dialectical master/slave relationship and the difference between imaginary and symbolic interactions. This model is then tested against the interview material of 30 special educators drawn from the results of a wider random sample survey of 765 respondents in response to a burnout questionnaire. We found that Lacan's distinction between imaginary and symbolic functioning allows us to make a difference between high and low scorers. High scorers – among whom two subtypes can be distinguished – function mainly in an imaginary way. Among low scorers we similarly found two subgroups – one that interacts symbolically and one that interacts imaginarily, but in which latter case environmental factors are found to have a protective function.

KEYWORDS burnout ▪ intersubjectivity ▪ Lacan ▪ psychoanalysis ▪ qualitative research

Quantitative research shows that professional burnout is connected with conflictual perceptions of work relations and the receipt of little social support (Browner et al., 1987; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Jenkins et al.,

1997; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Leiter & Harvie, 1996; Sullivan & Bhagat, 1992; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

However, there is little qualitative research in the literature that systematically examines the connection between burnout, on the one hand, and typical patterns in the perception of interpersonal relations, on the other, in a methodologically stringent way (Vanheule, 2001). Previous qualitative research (Bennett et al., 1996; Browner et al., 1987; Firth, 1985; Friedman, 1991; Hallsten, 1993; Reagh, 1994; Whitaker, 1996) shows that burnout and pathological stress are coupled with a problematic perception of work relations, but these interrelations have not been taken as the specific focus of investigation. An additional methodological problem confronting several qualitative researches is the lack of a control group. Interesting from our point of view is Firth's conclusion (1985) that behind vague stress complaints lies the idea that one is loved only because of one's performance, or that behind problems in collegial relations lies a frequent fear of being fooled.

Nor has past research used Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for empirical studies in the relation between burnout and social relations. However, for this field of research Lacanian theory is deeply relevant, since for Lacan the intersubjective relation – called the relation between subject and other – is central.

In this article we examine, from a Lacanian perspective, the way people with burnout enter into an intersubjective relation. Beginning with a discussion of Lacan's theory of intersubjectivity, we use his intersubjective model to interpret research data gathered from a qualitative investigation into the way educators (whether suffering burnout or not) live social relations within their work group. We further determine how our intersubjective model enables us to differentiate between people suffering from burnout and others not suffering from this complaint.

Lacan's intersubjectivity model: imaginary versus symbolic relations

We see throughout Lacan's work a constant attempt to understand the essence of human interrelations. In developing his theory of social relations, Lacan often makes reference to the *master and slave* relationship. At first sight this seems a remarkable choice, not only given the historically dated character of this relationship but also its problematic current political implications. For our contemporary context, we can translate this relation into the terms 'superior' and 'inferior'. By the master/slave relation Lacan intends a metaphor to characterize typical human relations that are distinguished by a relation of *subordination and/or servitude.*

Through his readings of classical philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Hegel, and particularly through the work of Kojève (1947), Lacan typifies the singularity of human relations in these terms. In the following, we will first examine the master/slave dialectic, then we will apply Lacan's ideas to the relation between employees and their professional work context.

Master/slave dialectic

Lacan treats the master/slave relation as a paradigm for mapping the logic of intersubjectivity. Structurally, he distinguishes two types of relations: imaginary relations and symbolic relations. Furthermore, three stages in the development of relations may be identified (see Figure 1).

Throughout his work, Lacan begins from the premise that human beings do not have an inherent or 'true' identity. For Lacan, human subjectivity is characterized by an original and radical lack of identity. Nevertheless, we try to comprehend ourselves and to grasp who we are. Lacan talks about a typical human 'want-to-be' (Muller & Richardson, 1982: 22). Identification is a means of acquiring a greater subjective completion, but in order to acquire an identity, one must appeal to someone else; thus only by entering into a relation with another person is one able to claim an identity. Consequently, having an identity is not a natural condition, it is a social construction (see Lacan, 1979: 306, my translation: 'people humanize in relation to their equals' and Lacan, 1977: 80: 'identity is realised as disjunctive of the subject . . . this is what leads me to object to any reference to totality in the individual').

For Lacan, acquiring an identity involves a fundamental process of recognition which he elucidates through reference to the master/slave relation. According to Lacan, this relation is characterized in essence by mutual recognition: 'it is the recognition of man by man that is involved' (Lacan, 1977: 26). Although the master/slave relation in the present cultural context is associated in the first place with the unilateral exercise of power and repression, according to Lacan this relation is *primordially* based on a mutual *symbolic recognition*. An actual master/slave relation is only created when person x and person y implicitly agree to take up, respectively, the

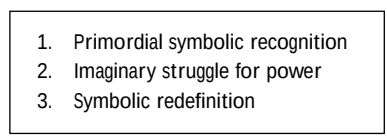

Figure 1 Three intersubjectivity stages

position of 'slave' and 'master' – they enter, so to speak, into a symbolic pact that defines them as 'slave' and 'master'. This recognition is crucial because it determines the identity of each and the nature of their relation. Because of their mutual recognition of each other in these positions, their interactions as master and slave can proceed.

According to Lacan, such symbolic recognition is the foundation of intersubjectivity. Only because they are recognized by other people can human beings acquire a place in a social network. Subjectivity is 'something produced by the position taken up by the subject in the circuit of exchange' (Frosh, 1997: 236–7). Lacan (1977: 58) adds to this that 'man's . . . first object of desire is to be recognised by the other'. Without intersubjective recognition human beings, socially speaking, do not amount to anything and have no identity of their own.

Crucial to this reasoning is the idea that the subjective position of a person is determined by the place he or she ascribes to the other. Human beings do not so much acquire an identity by assuming certain characteristics, but by ascribing characteristics to someone else and positioning themselves with regard to such characteristics. This can be illustrated by means of the master/slave relation. Such relation can take shape only if the slave (x) recognizes the other (y) as his master. After all, only by characterizing person y as 'master' can x implicitly assume the position of 'slave', as represented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

By recognizing the other in a certain way (y = master), one also determines the position taken up by oneself (x = slave). According to this reasoning, people determine their own identity by the way they define other people.

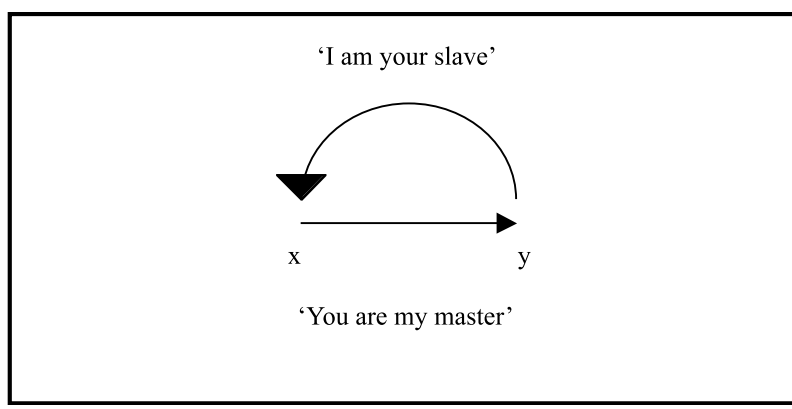

Figure 2 Diagram of the master/slave relation

The glasses through which we see the world implicitly determine our own place in the world, independent of our conscious intentions. So the message 'you are my master' given by person x to person y makes it clear, conversely, that x is the slave of the other (see the returning arrow in Figure 2). According to Lacan (1988b: 324) the subject receives his own message back from the other 'in an inverted form', with, as a final conclusion 'I am your slave'. This inversion implies that 'I' and 'your' replace the pronouns 'you' and 'mine', and that the noun 'master' is replaced by its semantic opposite 'slave'. By inversion, the sentence 'You are my master' becomes 'I am your slave'.

Summarizing, we can say that a symbolic recognition takes place in the first stage of intersubjectivity, which assigns a position to people ('slave' and 'master') and results in a relation structure ('slave–master'). In the next stage, this structure acquires meaning.

Lacan tells us that the master/slave relation is typified by a *struggle for power*. The slave who recognizes person y as his master challenges the latter's superiority with this recognition (Lacan, 1988a). The master is regarded as an oppressor – as a frustrating authority who deprives his or her slave of freedom and is the cause of the slave's discomfort. The slave rebels from the idea that the master unjustly takes advantage of the work done by the slave.

Whereas in the first stage of symbolic recognition positions were traced out (x = slave, y = master), in the second stage roles are taken up. Master and slave are opposed to one another as a couple with conflicting interests. On the basis of the original relation structure, an implicit scenario is generated in which they adopt roles as competitors or duelling protagonists. In this stage they identify with their positions of slave and master.

The struggle originates at the level of *being*: the slave no longer wants to be a slave nor does he or she want the master as master. Lacan calls this struggle *imaginary*, because it is based on an assumption: 'the slave assumes that the master is a master, and that when he has something precious within his reach, he grabs it' (Lacan, 1988b: 187). From this inferior position, the slave fantasizes about the master's easy life and his or her exploitation of slavery, and becomes dissatisfied. Lacan describes how slaves 'will consider themselves wretches, nobodies, and will think – *how happy the master is in enjoying being master*?' (Lacan, 1988b: 72, emphasis in original).

In this stage of the relation, the creation of an image is central. The slave and the master each have an image of the other and depart from that image at the moment they enter into interaction. According to Lacan, such a formation is coupled with misjudgement because the relativity of their own assumption is not taken into consideration. The slave, for instance, is fixated on the belief that he or she is exploited by the master and that the master secretly enjoys this at his or her expense, 'whereas, of course, he [the master]

will be completely frustrated' (Lacan, 1988b: 72). However, because of this fixed idea about the master, the slave does not take the last possibility into consideration.

The slave's impression of being wronged is based on the image he or she has of the master – the slave regards the master as a threatening body; as someone who unjustly takes advantage. This provokes a feeling of frustration and aggression toward the master whom the slave supposes to be deliberately frustrating him or her, and, as a result, they become rivals. 'Aggressivity . . . becomes the beam of the balance on which will be centred the decomposition of the equilibrium of counterpart to counterpart in the Master–Slave relationship' (Lacan, 1977: 308). In the master/slave relation, a hostile power struggle begins in which the competitors will fight to the death if necessary.

The slave does not realize that, by reasoning in terms of power and conflict, he or she only reconfirms this inferior position. From the slave's perspective, there are two ways of reacting, both of which maintain his or her subordinate relation to the master. Whether submitting to the master or choosing to fight for freedom, in either case the slave finds himself or herself in a type of relation in which the master dominates. According to Lacan (1993), all protest based on the idea of emancipation is ineffective for truly realizing freedom. By fighting for and dreaming of freedom, the slave reconfirms once more that he or she is oppressed. Through this protest against the master, the slave maintains the existing balance of power from which, at a certain level, he or she wants to escape (Lacan, 2001). In this sense, it is the imaginary formation itself that is the actual master that keeps the slave imprisoned.

To summarize so far: in the first stage of intersubjectivity, positions are exclusively traced out. Person x is defined as a slave and person y as a master. In the second stage we shift to the dynamics of the relation, in which the primordial symbolic structure is filled in through roles. This relation has a self-sustaining meaning since the slave and the master act as rivals.

This meaning does not appear out of the blue. The historical and cultural background of persons x and y colours the master/slave relationship. As Long puts it (1991: 390) 'cultural signifiers provide the context for the individual'. In this situation 'a law is imposed upon the slave, that he should satisfy the desire and the pleasure [jouissance] of the other' (Lacan, 1988a: 223). The surrounding discourse (Foucault, 1975) tells person x and person y how they should behave with regard to each other. If they actually enter into interaction according to the chalk lines of this agreement, they opt for routine (Miller, 1999), in which case, the slave becomes subordinate to the master.

A possible way out indicated by Lacan is by *redefinition of the primordial symbolic positions*. This brings us to a third stage of intersubjectivity which consists of a return to the relation structure and opens possibilities for testing other ways of relating with each other. After all, 'the pact is everywhere anterior to the violence before perpetuating it, and what I call the symbolic dominates the imaginary' (Lacan, 1977: 308). For a slave to escape the ever-escalating conflict with the master, in other words, it is essential to return to the basic relation and to develop a meta-perspective on the relation structure. By understanding that it is the context that instructs x and y to interact as slave and master, x or y may conclude that his or her assigned role is relative and that it is possible to go beyond the contours of this role. In such cases, creative ways are opened to enable the subject to enter into a relation in another way and to develop another identity. Such a changeover is not, however, easy – by throwing himself or herself into the imaginary struggle with the master, the slave has, so to speak, gone blind as regards the structure by which their relation is determined. Lacan shows how another position is possible, but can only be reached by assigning another place to the other: the slave can shake off the yoke of slavery solely by no longer defining the master as master.

The step by which one chooses to leave the programmed agreement of the relation is not obvious. After all, if person x does choose to see the relation with person y through other glasses, something that was previously secure about his or her own identity disappears. The redefinition of the other's identity implies a redefinition of oneself. In this case, the former routine no longer suffices to interpret the mutual relation, which will result in fear and uncertainty. But the gain from such a choice is found in the number of creative paths that will be opened, both in the field of relation and in the field of identity.

This symbolic reinvention of the relation stands or falls with the decision no longer to behave as a product or creature of the relation. As long as the slave regards himself or herself as someone dominated by the master – a situation which may be welcomed or regretted – he or she remains imprisoned in an imaginary sham fight (Lacan, 1966). Only by regarding oneself as the producer or creator of a relation can one realize something new.

A deduction[1]: intersubjectivity in a professional context

Before we can test this model against our research data, we must examine how we can translate the ideas from the master/slave relation model into interrelations within a professional team.

According to the theory of intersubjectivity, a group can be regarded

as a network of relations, in which each member takes up a position (see stage 1 of Lacan's model) and consequently acquires an identity. The nature of these positions and relations is determined by the discourse surrounding the group. Both the group members and people outside the group determine the functioning of the group through their accounts of it. We assume that a group's or team's discourse about its own functioning and its own past defines laws for the interrelations among its members. It determines do's and don'ts for the position of each team-mate (see Kaës, 2002). A new teacher for instance, who fills the vacancy left by a colleague who has been harassed out of his or her job does not start simply with a clean slate – past events at the school determine the position into which the new teacher is placed. The 'history of the group acts as a constraint on future significations, and also acts retrospectively by influencing members' accounts of the past' (Long, 1991: 399). In this case it is not so much the actual events that have such a determining influence on the way of entering into a relation but the narrative structure within which these events acquired a place. In the same way, the wider cultural discourse (for instance the current social attitude towards teachers) determines the place someone occupies in the job context. The narrative structure constitutes the tradition that tells what the relation between person x and person y ought to be.

It is on the basis of this structure that people relate to one another. An important question Lacan's theory enables us to ask is: do people identify themselves with the role outlined in the narrative scenario (an imaginary reaction) or do they try to establish their relation in their own way (a symbolic reaction)? Crucial in a symbolic reaction is the change a person effects in the relation through a different positioning of the other.

Qualitative investigation into burnout

Our question is to ask to what extent this theoretical model helps to account for the way people take up relations at work. More specifically, we wonder in what ways attitudes towards work relations differ between people who are suffering from burnout and those who are not. To discover this, we address the described model with research data gathered through combined qualitative and quantitative research.

Sample

The sample was made up based on burnout screening, using the Flemish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Vlerick, 1993). A total of 1317

questionnaires were sent to special educators from the (residential) special youth care sector and from the mentally handicapped care sector. We had 992 questionnaires returned (response rate 75.6%) through letterboxes installed by us in all homes concerned (n = 47). Questionnaires with missing values were removed, resulting in a final random sample of 765 special educators – 212 from the special youth care sector and 553 from the mentally handicapped care sector. The subgroup of educators from the special youth care sector comprised 70 percent women, with an average age of 33.2 years (SD 8.6 years), who had been working in the sector for 9.8 years on average (SD 7.9 years). The random sample of educators from the mentally handicapped care sector comprised 70 percent women, with an average age of 34.4 years (SD 8 years), who had been working in the sector for 12.2 years on average (SD 7.7 years).

During burnout screening the respondents were asked whether they were willing to participate in an interview, and 185 people in the final random sample were willing to do so. From this group, the 15 highest and the 15 lowest scoring respondents on the burnout questionnaire were selected – their score forming, respectively, part of the highest and lowest 10 percent of the random sample.

Measures

Burnout screening was carried out by means of the Flemish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Vlerick, 1993), which is internationally the most used scale to measure burnout.

The interviews were semi-structured, with respondents being asked to specify the major difficulties they experienced at work in their relations with clients, colleagues and the executive staff, and how they dealt with such difficulties. This was done each time by means of two critical incidents. In the same way they were asked to specify the factors that satisfied them most. Two trained interviewers conducted the interviews, which took between 1.5 and 2 hours and were recorded on tape.

Analysis

Each interview was typed out verbatim and then methodologically processed on the basis of work by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Miles and Huberman (1994), Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1997) and Vanheule (2002). The interviews were analysed in detail and coded by each interviewer, using the Atlas-ti computer program. After initial coding, the researchers met to review their coding of all 30 cases and resolve any discrepancies. With a view to

comparison with Lacan's intersubjectivity theory, codes were grouped into co-ordinating codes and matrixes. Attention was paid to the difference between high and low scoring respondents, in the way they related to colleagues and executive staff.

Results

Applying Lacan's theory of intersubjectivity to our research data, three types of relations can be distinguished, each of which can be typified by a central 'catch phrase'. This catch phrase constitutes the basis of the script, so to speak, that determines the method of interaction (see Figure 3).

Descriptions of these three types of interactions follow, each illustrated with a case.

High burnout score type 1

In this first reaction type – characterized by people with a high burnout score – a hostile imaginary tension is at the centre. The person is dissatisfied, he or she holds someone else responsible for what goes wrong at work or in their mutual relation, and challenges the other because of this. This results in conflict escalation. With regard to Lacan's theory, this reaction type corresponds to the slave who challenges the master.

This is coupled with a feeling that one is personally targeted by the other and wronged. Such a person will rebel against this wrong by denouncing the shortcomings of the other. The person concerned is convinced that he or she is right and has the idea that the other is hiding in a position of convenience. By identifying oneself as the other's opposite, a relation is created whereby people act as opponents. Typical affects experienced in the interaction include: feeling oneself wronged, disappointment, envy, and aggression.

Burnout score	Reaction type	Catch phrase of script
High (type 1)	Imaginary	'I refuse to accept that you are my master'
High (type 2)	Imaginary	'My master's will is my law, but I get caught up in it'
Low	Symbolic	'Departing from this structure, I am creative'

Figure 3 Differentiating catch phrase connected with the burnout score

One of the respondents put it as follows:

> I was working in a community and my direct superior was an older colleague whose approach was actually quite different from mine. She was very direct and she had something dominating. I really felt that. At the beginning I did not mention anything about it to her . . . I felt somewhat uncertain when I had to work together with her. I wondered whether I was doing well. She knew it and in my opinion I was not given much credit . . . I had the impression that she did not really care about the kids. She did things that were actually not relevant and other things that were really important she did not do. So I found that we needed a microwave to heat up leftovers. She did not reserve money for it. After a year I had to see the manager for an evaluation talk. He told that I criticised everything. I think that she had yet not been criticised by anyone. It was time that someone told her what he thought. This is mentioned in my file . . . That older colleague went to the manager to complain behind my back, without showing anything . . . This is unbelievable. I was enormously shocked. At the centre they are talking all the time about assuming responsibility towards the kids. And I am treated like this. I have invested a lot in my job. I really wanted to do things with the kids and then I am met by a wall of complete incomprehension . . . The more hypocritical you are, the higher you get in hierarchy.
>
> (Respondent 20)

This way of entering into a relation is the perfect breeding ground for conflict escalation – one ends up in a vicious circle, convinced of being in the right, on which the battle is based. This swallows up the energy of the person concerned; the more he or she worries about the problem, the deeper he or she sinks into it. He or she does not realize that his or her own reaction may perpetuate the relation complained about. No meta-perspective is formed on the relation with the other. This reaction appears during the interview itself in the way the respondent goes on about the problem endlessly, without being able to create structure in the way it is talked about.

We noticed that this type of conflict occurs when a person is confronted with a group tradition against which he or she rebels by identifying himself or herself with the position of the opponents. This protest results in a (threatening) expulsion from the group (see respondents 20, 22, 27).

Another context in which we found a similar type of reaction was the case in which a person is attacked by someone else and joins battle on this basis. Typical conflicts we noticed were battles with colleagues or superiors

about who is right in judging critical situations (respondents 18, 19, 31, 25) and battles among colleagues about who gets a positive evaluation from his or her superiors, or deserves one (respondents 19, 32).

High burnout score type 2

People in the second type of reaction are characterized by their attempt to efface themselves for the sake of the other. They feel that the other wants something from them, and they try to satisfy that wish. They try to *be* what the other lacks by incarnating as far as possible the role they suppose the other expects of them. We noticed that these people are perfectionists and are not satisfied with partial answers – they are convinced it is their duty to satisfy the wishes of other people. In Lacan's terminology this way of entering into relations corresponds with the slave who tries to serve his or her master as properly as possible, through identification with the role of servant.

One of the effects of this positioning is that people get the impression that their work is weighing heavily on them. After all, the answer they provide to the question posed by the other is never sufficient. We noticed that these people take their work so seriously that the rest of their lives threatens to collapse under it. When things are not going as expected, they are inclined to feel themselves personally responsible – professional difficulties are interpreted as signs of personal failure. Most try to keep the burden they experience at a distance through rationalization.

The following story is an illustration of these dynamics.

> I love my job. I do not want another job, but sometimes the pressure of work is too high. Actually I am someone with a great sense of responsibility. If my colleagues or my superiors do not have enough time or are unable to do something alone and ask to me to help, I think: this is in the interest of our work, I do it. Or also if there is a problem at the centre, for instance someone gets aggressive or in the event of open house, I help them. Sometimes it is too much. Actually, I should draw my lines better, because my own work is not done and before you are aware of it, you are always dealing with the most complicated problems . . . I do not stand up enough for what I find important myself . . . I always feel pity for other people.
>
> (Respondent 21)

We noticed that the tendency for self-sacrifice leads to an attempt to model one's own wishes and impulses in the service of the other. One tries to eliminate impulses that are contrary to the other's supposed expectation. This

tendency was evident in the interviews from the fact that these people did not bring up negative feelings, or rationalized them away (e.g. respondent 24: 'it's like I have a button in my head, when I have too many problems I just switch it off').

Psychoanalytically speaking, each attempt to efface oneself is doomed to fail. On the one hand this attempt is problematic because, by doing so, one's own identity threatens to disappear into the other's. On the other hand, effacing oneself will always fail since every defence against an unwanted impulse will result in an indirect expression of this impulse. Respondents suffering this type of burnout give the impression of doing everything in order to avoid drawing this conclusion. So as not to have to question their self-effacing way of entering a relation and to escape its consequences, these people seem to run away from contacts with the other when they cannot cope with it any more.

They do this for instance by staying home from work because of overstrain or physical complaints (respondents 23, 24, 26, 30) or by adopting a stand-offish attitude or being unreachable at work (respondent 21).

Low burnout score

Compared with high scoring respondents, people with a low burnout score and a symbolic interaction style attract attention because of their clear meta-perspective with regard to work relations and its ensuing problems (respondents 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15). As far as relations are concerned, these people always seem to begin from what the Lacanian perspective calls the 'determining symbolic structure'. They reflect on how people relate to each other and are sensitive to how various positions are assumed. In connection with this meta-perspective they mainly reflect strategically on interrelations. They take the sensitivities of the others into account and discount their own share in the way things are going.

In comparison with high scoring respondents, these respondents pay a lot less attention to issues of power or to the question of how the others see them. Their identity seems to be anchored to such an extent that they do not pay much attention to these questions. If there are problems, they keep to the facts of the incident in discussions and try directly to find a solution. When consulting with others they are not inclined to pretend; people they are critical of will know this directly from them. If challenged by others in such extreme ways that conflicts result, they do not feel personally targeted and are inclined to make an appeal to a mediating third party (for instance a hierarchical superior). These respondents will not just sit there, they couple actions to their conclusions. The coherence between what they conclude from their meta-perspective and their way of acting is striking.

One of the respondents puts it as follows:

> If the co-operation gives rise to conflicts, I am someone who raises this matter immediately, who provides feedback. I say what I think, what is wrong with me. I try to do this as directly as I can . . . At the centre there was a substitute head of department who always tried to impose all kinds of rules on our team in a very authoritarian way. She has a strong own idea about how we have to organize things. The risk to lock horns with her on that matter always exists, but I have found a tactic to handle it. If you tell your own opinion to her, if you stand up for yourself, she reacts by taking advantage of your emotions. I have learned not to get hit anymore. I have found a style to deal with that kind of situation since we are here to work together. I am someone who is always very open and spontaneous, but with her I associate differently, more task and duty oriented. We enter into clear agreements, and if she does not fulfil them, I tell her. I know what I am talking about.
>
> (Respondent 12)

These people seem to do their work based on what they desire and on a wider view of life. Taking the situation of the conventions in the group into account, they try to establish the relations in their own way, and succeed in creating something else from a clear awareness regarding the place they have. By looking at relation patterns in a different way, people with a low burnout score manage to have a refreshing outlook on their work. Others are often surprised by their creativity and become enthusiastic themselves.

This way of interacting was also actualized during the interviews. There are few speculations regarding the intentions of others; these respondents develop a clear and all-embracing view of problems and are able to communicate and discriminate things about their job in a short period of time. Unlike high scoring respondents, their story is stable and logically ordered.

Discussion

Beginning with Lacan's intersubjectivity model, we distinguished three types of interrelations that allowed us to differentiate between people with high and low burnout scores. By means of our research data, we identified the style of interaction of respondents with a high score as 'imaginary' (among which we found two subtypes) and that of low scoring correspondents as 'symbolic'. We conclude that the imaginarily functioning, high scoring respondents generally identify themselves with a role (rebellious/submissive)

with which they completely merge and that is complementary to the role assumed by the other. Precisely as a result of this complementarity, an escalation is created by means of which both roles are reinforced. Symbolically functioning, low scoring respondents, on the other hand, succeed in creatively changing the narrative structure in which imaginarily functioning respondents remain imprisoned. They accomplish this through acquiring a meta-perspective achieved through a primarily symbolic intersubjective relation. The connection between our research data and the Lacanian intersubjectivity model implies a confirmation of the theoretical model. Some differentiation, however, is necessary.

In theoretical terms, the distinction between an imaginary and a symbolic interaction is very clear. Empirically, however, we noticed that the difference is not so clear-cut and that it manifests itself in terms of general tendencies: high scoring respondents interact *mainly* imaginarily and low scoring respondents *mainly* symbolically. Moreover, the difference between the two groups reveals itself best in the way they describe conflicts and the way they deal with them.

We concluded that we could place the 15 respondents with a high burnout score within types 1 and 2, but also found that not all respondents (five out of 15) with a low score could be placed within the described typology of low scoring respondents. This is a subgroup that enters largely imaginarily into relations but in whose work context a number of protective factors exist to prevent them from running into conflict escalation (i.e. high score type 1) or from getting entangled in their dedication (i.e. high score type 2). The effect of the protective factors is to enable such people to put difficult situations they encounter into perspective. They prevent the person from becoming lost in the imaginary. Each of the respondents within this group seemed aware of the risk of 'spontaneously' getting into such situations. Among the protective environmental factors we observed were working in a team environment, which induces people to articulate the difficulties they experience in relation to others (respondents 1, 4, 3, 16); using clear rules for themselves and others (for instance refusing to do overtime) (respondents 13, 16); finding a channel to express one's anger (respondents 13, 16); or doing another job part-time, in which co-operation with others is less central (respondent 4).

Through applying Lacanian theory to our qualitative research data, our investigation discloses the intersubjective dynamics of burnout, a topic that until now has received little attention. The advantage of this approach lies in the connections it forges between burnout and the various modes of entering into relations (symbolic versus imaginary), on the one hand, and the intersubjective process by which identity is acquired on the other. Our proposed

model (see Figure 3) can be used to differentiate between people suffering from burnout and others not subject to this complaint. Further investigation is necessary to validate the described model – special attention must be paid to the group of low respondents functioning imaginarily, as it must be to the role and functioning of the protective environmental factors.

While, from a methodological point of view, such research as ours is strictly unable to address questions of the teleological causation of burnout – our particular research design has little to say about the influence of psychological, group-dynamic, organizational or cultural determinants, for example – nevertheless, it has enabled us to study the logic of how people perceive their work relations and to map the structure by which they make sense of their experiences.

Lacan himself, from his psychoanalytic perspective, was quite uninterested in resolving questions of teleology. Where he did address the question of causation, he inverted its classical logical and scientific meaning by claiming that it is the Freudian 'Ichspaltung', or what he calls the division of the subject, that should be considered the basis for all thinking about the cause (see Lacan, 1966: 855–77). For Lacan, this 'Spaltung' or division is the 'material cause' of all (inter-)subjectivity (Lacan, 1966: 875). Although, on the one hand, this concerns the determination of the subject by the signifier and the aforementioned primordial symbolic recognition, this cause also pertains to the subject's inherent 'in-determination'; that is, his or her absence of tangible determination. We can connect this latter aspect of causation to the Lacanian category of the 'real', which refers primarily to the dimension of the bodily drive that all subjects try to *master* by way of their symbolic and imaginary representations and relations but which, because of its incongruous nature, all representations necessarily fall short of (see Žižek, 1988). 'The Real is un-Imaginable and un-Symbolizable. It just is' (Grotstein, 1995: 300). The ways people relate in the imaginary and the symbolic reflects a positioning with regard to this 'real' and consequently a form of 'enjoyment' (concerning this idea of 'enjoyment' or 'jouissance': see Miller, 1999) or attachment to the real.

We find that, because of its emphasis on intersubjectivity, our model is particularly relevant for interventions. However, since people's places in the imaginary and the symbolic reflect a position taken towards the real, intervention has to involve more than merely stimulating people into making a mental or cognitive shift. Intervention needs to focus primarily on people's attachment to their style of interaction and consequently this must be designed from the basis of the psychoanalytic concept of working through. Further investigation into the implications of interventions and into the effective process of intervention that takes this model as its starting point is required.

Note

1 When Lacan discusses the master/slave relation, his main purpose is to gain better insight into the transference relation during psychoanalysis. So he for instance concludes that in the transference relation the obsessional neurotic acts as a slave who is afraid of the struggle with the analyst, who is regarded as the master. The obsessional neurotic submits to the master and seems to postpone the arising of his or her own longing until the master's death. On the other hand, within hysteria it is typical that in a first stage the analyst is raised to the role of master and then there are complaints about his or her failure (Lacan, 1977).

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