

# *An Overview of Depersonalization in the Organizational Context*

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## **Abstract**

Little research exists on the concept of depersonalization in non-clinical and organizational settings. Since its origin, the concept has been mainly studied as a 'disorder' in clinical population. It was described as a state in which an individual experiences feelings, thoughts, memories, or bodily sensations as not belonging to oneself. Gradually, researchers from non-clinical domains also borrowed the concept. In organizational context, depersonalization is studied as a reaction to stress, wherein, individuals limit their involvement with others and distance themselves psychologically. This article reviews the available literature on depersonalization and provides an understanding of the concept in the organizational context. This paper presents origin of the concept, definitional issues, and a conceptual model showing antecedents and consequences of depersonalization. It is expected that this paper will encourage further research in the domain and provide pointers to practising managers who generally face problems relating to depersonalization.

**Keywords:** depersonalization, burnout, emotional exhaustion.

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of job burnout is one of the widely studied topics among clinical, health and organizational behavior researchers. Job burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion, which occurs when employees are subjected to prolonged periods of stress within their work environment (Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009). Burnout is related with major organizational and individual level outcomes like absenteeism, performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and turnover (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Taris, 2009). Cordes and Dougherty (1993) suggested that service workers are more prone to the state of burnout when "they perceive that client demands

cannot or will not be met by the organization" (p. 644). Singh, Goolsby and Rhoads (1994) suggested that service sector jobs become extremely stressful as employees are consistently expected to fulfill multiple requests from a diverse set of customers. In addition, employees often have to balance the conflicting expectations of customers and those of the organization (Mulki, Lask, & Jaramillo, 2008). Dealing constantly with such diverse and conflicting demands causes service workers to experience stress, and finally face burnout. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2004). Among these three characteristics of burnout, depersonalization remains relatively less understood (Haudebert, Mulki, & Fournier, 2011).

Depersonalization is described as a defensive coping strategy, where an individual limits one's own involvement with others and creates a psychological distance. Through such response the individual tries to create an emotional buffer between oneself and the imposed job demand (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). It is also characterized as a negative, cynical or excessively detached response to other organizational members; it, thus represents the interpersonal component of burnout (Shirom, 2003). Empirical evidence has shown that depersonalization has significant dysfunctional ramifications, which implies substantial costs for both the organization and its members. For instance, it leads to absenteeism (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), reduced job satisfaction (Lee, et al., 2011), reduced commitment and turnover intentions (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Lee & Ashforth 1996; Lee, Lim, Yang, & Lee, 2011; Low et al., 2001).

Although the concept of depersonalization has been presented in medical literature for over hundred years (Jacobs & Bovasso, 1992), little research has attempted

to understand the concept in the organizational context. It was not until the early 1980s that systematic empirical studies on depersonalization in non-clinical population were conducted and published (Trueman, 1984). Prior to this the concept was mainly researched on clinical population or as a component of the burnout process. Specifically, only a couple of studies have focused on depersonalization as a primary variable in the context of organization and its members (Cheuk & Wong, 1998; Williams, Lawrence, Campbell, & Spiehler, 2009).

Thus, it seems necessary to develop a clear understating of the concept of depersonalization in the organizational context as this may enable effective coping strategies. The purpose of this article is to review extant literature and provide an understanding of the construct of depersonalization in the organizational context. This review comprises a brief history on depersonalization, the definitional view-points, measurement, antecedents and consequences. It highlights studies that investigated work-related antecedents and consequences of depersonalization. A complete understanding of various antecedents and consequences of depersonalization at both the organizational and individual level would help us develop certain intervention measures. These interventions will not only help at post depersonalization stage but also at prevention stage.

## 2. Emergence of the concept of Depersonalization

The study of depersonalization in organizational context is a relatively new development. The term first emerged as one of the twelve phases of the burnout process. Herbert Freudenberger (1974), considered as the founding father of the burnout syndrome, in his influential paper on "staff burn-out" set the stage for the introduction of the concept (Schaufeli, & Buunk, 2003). Burnout is a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that has failed to produce the expected reward (Wessells, 1989). Further, in the process of understanding the burnout phenomenon, Maslach and colleagues (1982) suggested three components of burnout, namely, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, low personal accomplishment (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986; Maslach & Jackson, 1981b). Subsequently, Maslach &

colleagues (2001) modified the latter two dimensions. Depersonalization was replaced by cynicism, which referred to negative attitudes involving frustration from disillusionment and distrust of organizations, persons, groups, or objects (Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Personal accomplishment was replaced by reduced efficacy or ineffectiveness, which includes self-assessment of low self-efficacy, lack of accomplishment, lack of productivity and incompetence (Leiter & Maslach, 2001). Recently a four-dimensional model of burnout has been proposed (Salanova, et al., 2005) which contains cynicism, depersonalization, exhaustion and professional efficacy as dimensions of burnout. Unlike Maslach's (1981b) and Jackson's (1986) conceptualization, this multi-group factor analytic study suggests that depersonalization and cynicism are two different psychological constructs.

The original conceptualization of depersonalization is borrowed from clinical psychology, as the literature suggests that the term was first coined in 1889 (Sierra & Berrios, 1997). The concept has existed in medical literature for over hundred years (Jacobs & Bovasso, 1992). Therefore it would be logical to first understand the definitions of depersonalization given in these areas.

The term depersonalization became subsumed under the category of dissociative disorders. It was then a new kind of disorder and was defined as resulting from pathological changes in the sensory system, memory, affect, body image and self-experience (Sierra & Berrios, 1997). The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2004) defines depersonalization as a malfunction or anomaly of the mechanism by which an individual has self-awareness. It is a feeling of watching oneself act, while having no control over a situation (APA, 2004).

In medical terms the concept is defined as the symptoms of an individual who no longer acknowledges himself/herself as a personality and for whom the outer world has lost its character of reality (Mayer, 1935). Depersonalization is a subjective experience of unreality in one's sense of self (Radovic & Radovic, 2002).

### 3. Concept: Definition, Nature, Antecedents and Consequences

Depersonalization is a state in which an individual experiences that his/her feelings, thoughts, memories, or bodily sensations do not belong to him/her. It is exemplified in terms of 'a feeling of strangeness', a feeling of 'not being me', or a sense of unreality of oneself (Trueman, 1984: 107). Depersonalization is the possibility, if people's actions are treated by others as less significant; they can experience themselves as not present in the world of ordinary, everyday life and may lose their sense of agency (Harre & Lamb, 1983).

The concept of depersonalization is distinguished from the concept of derealization (Fleiss, Gurland & Goldberg, 1975), where the former is a non-delusional belief that one's physical self is no longer intact and latter is a non-delusional belief that one's surroundings are no longer intact. Jacobs and Bovasso (1992) highlighted five different types of depersonalization namely (i) 'inauthenticity' -loss of genuineness or sense of authenticity in experiencing the self and interaction with others, (ii) self-negation or denial that one is performing certain actions or that one is witnessing certain events occurring in the environment which (Myers & Grant, 1972) is referred to as a loss of recognition of personal identity, (iii) self-objectification -a profound sense of disorientation in which the world is experienced as rapidly changing and basic distinctions between self and objects are blurred, and (iv) derealization - alterations in the perception of people and objects, and body detachment - involves the sense of one's body as strange, unfamiliar, or not belonging to the owner.

Depersonalization is a component of burnout, as suggested in the three component model of job burnout by Maslach and Jackson (1981a, b). The other two components are emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishments. Here emotional exhaustion is defined as 'draining out' of an individual's emotional resources due to excessive work demands; and diminished personal accomplishments as a sense of inadequacy in terms of an individual's ability to relate to people and to perform their jobs (Maslach, 1978). Yet another conceptualization of the burnout process by

Golembiewski and Munzenrider (1981, 1984) and Golembiewski (1989) hypothesized that significant depersonalization is necessary to diminish feelings of personal accomplishment, and significant reductions in personal accomplishment are necessary to result in high levels of emotional exhaustion. A feeling of reduced personal accomplishment is characterized by a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

In addition to the three-component model of burnout, some researchers have also found support for a two-component model (Brookings, Bolton, Brown, & McEvoy, 1985), with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as the two components. However, empirical evidence supports the idea that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment are conceptually distinct components (Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981; Maslach & Jackson, 1981b). Still other studies have found high correlations between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Leiter, 1989; Wolpin, Burke, & Greenglass, 1991). Taris and colleagues (2005) attempted to explore the causal relationships among these components on the basis of longitudinal data and suggested that higher levels of depersonalization results in increase of emotional exhaustion and reduction of personal accomplishment. Thus we can infer that depersonalization is one of the prime components of job-burnout and therefore it can be broadly labeled as an outcome of job stress. Subsequently as delineated, depersonalization is also related to emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment. However, in the organizational context, literature stands mute on the cause and effect relation of depersonalization with emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment. One such study has highlighted this gap and pointed out that these three components of burnout are related but are loosely coupled reactions to a job (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986: 630). Given the nature of these three states, namely depersonalization, emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment, we contend that there is a hierarchical arrangement of the order of these factors/states. In this arrangement, when an individual

faces job stress, it causes emotional exhaustion. This in turn leads to depersonalization, which further gives rise to diminished personal accomplishment.

Proposition 1a: Emotional exhaustion arising out of job stress will cause depersonalization.

Proposition 1b: Depersonalization, a cause of emotional exhaustion, will further cause diminished personal accomplishment.

Depersonalization is a stress reaction; it is assumed to be unique to individuals working in human service occupations and is a distinctly new construct which is less explored in the traditional job stress literature (Jackson, Schwab & Schuler, 1986). Cordes and Dougherty (1993) have used the term dehumanization as synonymous to depersonalization, which is marked by the treatment of clients as objects rather than people. In this state, the workers may display a detached and an emotional callousness, and they may be cynical toward co-workers, clients, and the organization. Visible symptoms include the use of derogatory or abstract language, strict compartmentalization of professional lives, intellectualization of the situation, withdrawal through longer breaks or extended conversations with co-workers, and extensive use of jargons (Maslach & Pines, 1977). Thus, depersonalization may minimize potentially intense emotional arousal that could interfere with functioning during crisis situations (Jackson, et al., 1986).

Proposition 2: Depersonalization will be more for employees in service sector as compared to those working in non-service or production sector.

As antecedents to depersonalization, it is reported that in an organizational context role conflict (Jawahar, Stone, & Kisamore, 2007) and perceived role ambiguity for an employee contributes to significant amount of variance in depersonalization (Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982). A study among air-medical health care professionals indicates that, certain workplace stressors namely risk perceptions, worries, and patient-care barriers jointly account for significant variance in depersonalization (Day, Sibley, Scott, Tallon, & Ackroyd-Stolarz, 2009). Political skill and perceived organizational support are found to be negatively related with depersonalization

(Jawahar, et al., 2007). Political skill and perceived organizational support were also found to moderate the relationship between perceived role conflict and depersonalization, such that an individual with high political skills and with high perceived organizational support will experience less depersonalization (Jawahar, et al., 2007). On the basis of experimental evidences (Prooijen & Knippenberg, 2000), it was found that personal status affects the extent to which individuals have a depersonalized perception of the self, that is, perceived themselves in terms of their group membership rather than individual characteristics. It was observed that individuals with low personal status displayed more depersonalization than individuals with high personal status. A meta-analytic study indicated that, over-involvement has significant negative correlation with depersonalization (Lee, et al., 2011). A recent work by Le Blanc and colleagues (2008) highlighted the concept of presenteeism, the phenomenon to stay at work even when employee is physically or mentally sick. They demonstrated in a longitudinal analysis that presenteeism leads to depersonalization over time. Depersonalization also develops as a coping response due to some organizational level factors like work overload (Jackson, et al., 1986) and rigid and controlling administrative practices (Savicki & Cooley, 1983).

Proposition 3: Individual and organizational level factors influence depersonalization in an organizational context.

Proposition 3a: Organizational context role conflict, an organizational level factor, will be negatively related with depersonalization.

Proposition 3b: Perceived role ambiguity, an organizational level factor, will be negatively related with depersonalization.

Proposition 3c: Work place stress, an organizational level factor, will be negatively related with depersonalization.

Proposition 3d: Individuals' political skills, an organizational level factor, will be positively related with depersonalization.

Proposition 3e: Perceived organizational support, an organizational level factor, will be positively related with depersonalization.

Proposition 3: Individual's personal status in the organization, an organizational level factor, will be positively related with depersonalization.

Studies also report that, the experience of depersonalization differs due to the nature of job and gender difference (Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992). They found that women experienced more depersonalization if they were non-managers, whereas men experienced more depersonalization if they were managers. Personal support and organizational support are found to be negatively related to depersonalization (Leiter, 1989). Work experience is also observed as negatively associated with depersonalization (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984). Psychological strain and helplessness are reported to be associated with higher levels of depersonalization (Lee & Ashforth, 1990).

Proposition 4: Female non-managerial and male managerial level employees experience more depersonalization as compared to their male counterparts.

Job satisfaction (Arabaci, 2010), turnover intentions and reduced commitment are found to be associated as consequences of depersonalization (Firth & Britton, 1989; Halbesleben & Buckley 2004; Lee & Ashforth 1996; Lee, Lim, Yang, & Lee, 2011; Low et al. 2001; Lee, et al., 2011). Absenteeism was positively correlated with depersonalization (Maslach & Jackson, 1981b).

As a consequence of depersonalization, there is a loss of feeling of personal accomplishment (Leiter, 1989). Diestel and Schmidt (2010), on the basis of a longitudinal study suggested that depersonalization might act as a moderator between emotional exhaustion and loss of feeling of personal accomplishment and this relationship needs to be further explored (Diestel & Schmidt, 2010). Job control and team efficacy are found to be moderators in the relationship between job stressors (risk perception, worries, and patient-care barriers) and depersonalization (Day, et al., 2009). Inauthenticity, the most frequent and pervasive form of depersonalization was best predicted by a cognitive style featuring intense, critical examination of self and others. Self-objectification, another form of

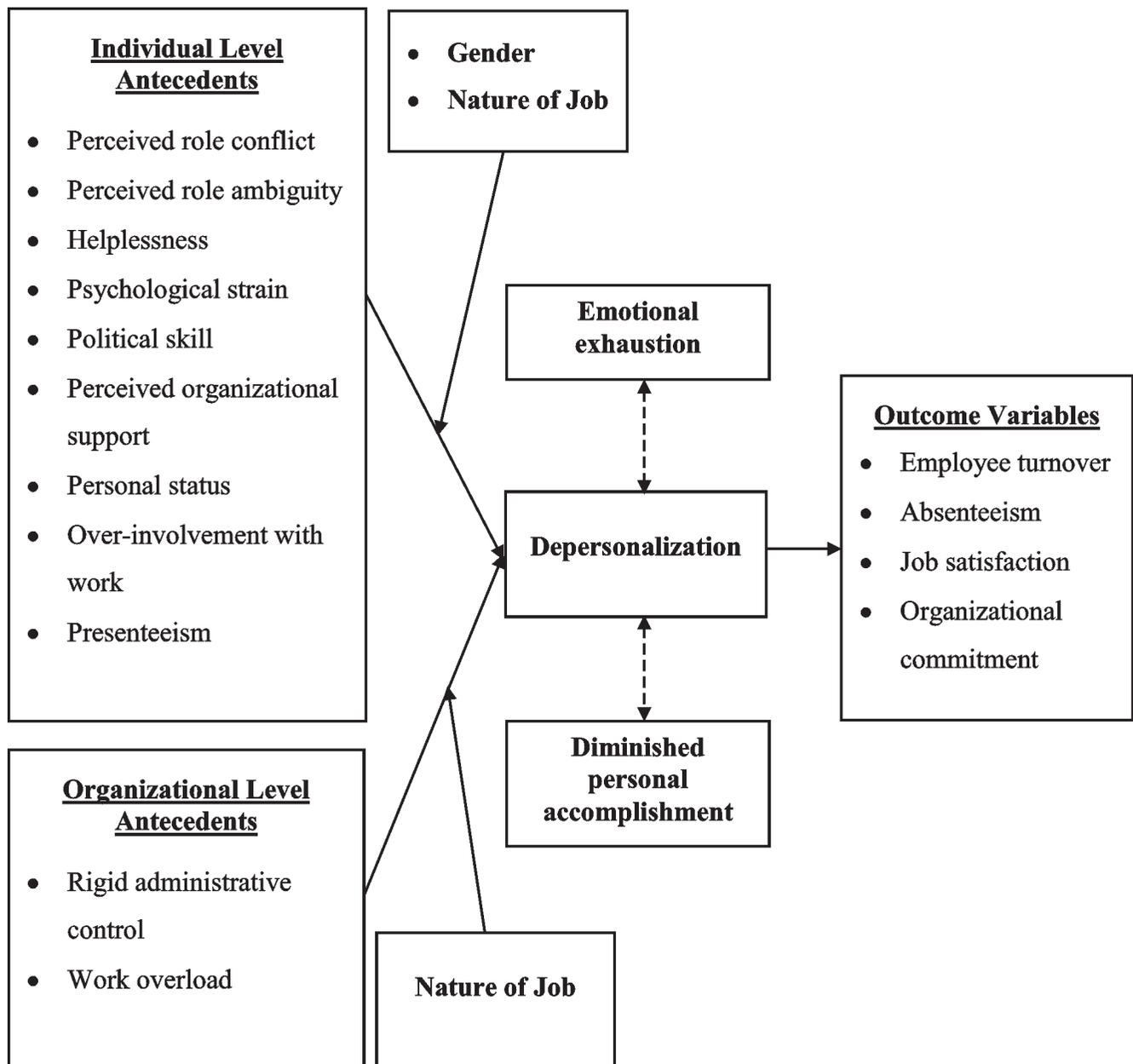
depersonalization was best predicted by thought disorganization and perceptual disorientation. Four forms of depersonalization, namely, self-objectification, self-negation, derealization, and body detachment were associated with depression (Jacobs & Bovasso, 1992).

On the basis of the above mentioned literature a conceptual model showing the antecedents and consequences of depersonalization is presented (Figure 1). The antecedents are classified into individual level and organizational level variables. The bold lines in the model represent the relationship drawn from the literature and the dotted lines represent a relationship that, although exists, the direction of the same is difficult to be inferred from the literature. The moderators in the relationship between depersonalization and its antecedents are also highlighted in the model.

#### 4. Implications and Conclusion

The primary objective of paper was to examine the nature, antecedents and consequences of depersonalization in the organizational context. Depersonalization connotes an individual's frigid and indifferent attitude towards the job and organization largely (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, & Bakker, 2002). In contrast to positive actions in the organization, depersonalization is labeled as an antisocial and deviant behavior. On basis of a thorough literature survey, this study identifies major organizational antecedents and consequences of depersonalization. This study also calls for future research and we contend that the phenomenon of depersonalization deserves enhanced attention by the organizational researchers; a similar contention has been drawn by other researchers (Hollet-Haudebert, Mulki, & Fournier, 2011). Depersonalization appears to be a prime component of the burnout process and it is conceptually distinct from the other two components, emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment. Notwithstanding, there exists no clear consensus in the literature about the relationship between the three components; in this direction we identify that, the other two components would be significantly correlated with depersonalization, however, an empirical test of this contention is warranted.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model Showing Antecedents and Consequences of Depersonalization in an Organizational Context



As stated earlier, depersonalization has a negative influence on employees' performance; further this relation becomes more significant in case of service sector firms because employees form boundary, spanning units who interface with the environment. Also, in the current volatile business environment, teamwork plays a crucial role in success of organizations and individuals thus become dependent on proportionate deliverable from the coworkers as well. This collectively requires that the employees be engaged with the organization and have amicable relationships with their coworkers. Any display of depersonalization will orchestrate detrimental outcomes on the employees' performance effectiveness; such a situation may have manifold influence on the coworkers and therefore on the overall organizational performance. The organization can mitigate and avoid these negativities in the environment by providing absolved guidelines and by reducing role conflict in the work environment.

As one of the most standard interventions to address depersonalization, organizations can act proactively to address job stress. In doing so, organizational structure should be the most basic attribute; further in this endeavor managers can act as significant catalysts. For instance, managers can address this by clarifying the organizational and job roles for their employees'. In a service industry, this becomes even more critical because often there exists a difference between what the employee does on the job and what is expected of him (Holle-Haudebert, Mulki, & Fournier, 2011), i.e., the deliverables are not clear enough in description. This discrepancy between the delivered and expected deliverables would cause a significant deal of job stress, as the employee might not be able to fulfill the role performance expectations at certain instances. Managers by being specific in their communication of role expectation can play a proactive role to counter job stress, and thereby help to mitigate probable conditions leading to depersonalization. Similarly employees in service sector also face huge pressure in meeting customer demands and following organizational mandates (Simon, Menguc, & Stefani, 2004). An individual employee might find himself/herself stuck in this dilemma, and therefore may not be able to deliver the needed solution to the customer, even when he or she is capable of the same. In such conditions managers should intervene by

providing greater autonomy in decision making, thereby allowing for improved organizational performance and also promoting an environment of mutual trust between the organization and the employee.

This paper also identifies that depersonalization will negatively influence desirable organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. These propositions are in line with theory, but, shall require empirical validation.

Depersonalization can be measured in various fashions and researchers have used different methods to measure the construct. Although a developing literature on depersonalization has provided preliminary clarification of the construct in the network of individual and organizational variables, enhanced research is solicited to build proactive (preventive) measures instead of reactive (curative) measures. This article is an attempt in the direction to provide necessary structural and conceptual clarity to aid in future research efforts.

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