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A pre-experimental study of an online micro intervention for improving psychological capital (PsyCap) and its impact on burnout in South African employees

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Abstract

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) is the combination of the four psychological capacities (hope, self-efficacy, optimism and resilience). Although unique in their own right, these constructs make up PsyCap, which is a reliable higher-order construct which is a potentially robust predictor of coping and health (Peterson, Luthans and Avolio., 2001). It is a positive individual characteristic; and its malleability and openness to development have made it the focus of considerable attention in recent years. This has become extremely relevant in the workplace as this environment is particularly stressful and challenging for many employees, which may possibly lead these individuals to experience burnout (Wilks, 2008; Ríos-Risquez et al., 2016). Having personal resources- such as psychological capital (hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience)- helps employees navigate this stressful environment (Lambert et al., 2003; Wilks, 2008; Hobfoll, 1989). These constructs are explained by the job demands resource model, as well as the conservation of resources model. Luthans (2006) suggests that a micro-intervention referred to as the Psychological Capital Intervention (PCI) is an effective way of developing these psychological capacities (Luthans et al., 2006; Guangyi & Shanshan, 2016; Peterson et al., 2011; Costantini et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). The purpose of the study was to determine if an employee's PsyCap (with components of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) can be developed through a highly focused online micro intervention directed towards *psychological capital: build your mental strength and flexibility*. The study has a secondary aim of determining whether the intervention is also effective in lowering individuals- specifically employees- burnout. Alongside identifying if the intervention is effective, the study takes a step further to determine if participation in the intervention worksheet had an impact on PsyCap and burnout scores.

This current research report focused on a non-probability sample of South African employees (n=32). These employees included those of any level of employment. Data was collected at two different times, whereby the pre-intervention (pre-test) used Google forms and questionnaires; the intervention used a narrated PowerPoint video; and the post-intervention used Google forms. The Psychological Capital – 24 (PCQ-24) was the measure used to capture psychological capital; and the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) was used to measure burnout.

Based on existing theory, it was expected that this online micro intervention directed towards *psychological capital: build your mental strength and flexibility* would improve levels of PsyCap and reduce burnout levels of South African employees. The results of this study revealed that the micro intervention was effective- although it revealed a small effect size. It was effective in developing PsyCap as an overall construct; as well as effective in developing all four dimensions that encompass PsyCap, namely self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism. However, individuals with high PsyCap scores did not result in a reduction of burnout. In addition, it was expected that participants who actively participated in the intervention worksheet (as well as the narrated intervention video) would result in improved PsyCap scores, which was confirmed in this study. However, participation in the intervention worksheet had no effect on individual's burnout scores. These results contribute to the accrual of scientific knowledge on a theory-driven and evidence-based HRD intervention.

Keywords: Psychological-capital, Burnout, Job-Demands Resource Model; Conservation of resources; Micro Online Intervention; South Africa