

## Work stress, -Burnout and Organizational Politics: Perceptions and Experience of Senior Managers in the South African Government Sector

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### Abstract

This study attempts to understand the causes and levels of work stress and burnout in a quantitative context. A mix method was adopted in which issues of organizational politics was also explored by using a qualitative approach. The sample was derived from a department of the South African Public Service and three quantitative questionnaires, namely the 'Work Life Experience Questionnaire', 'Maslach's Burnout Questionnaire' and a 'Biographical Questionnaire', were the measuring tools for this study. The sample constituted of 341 senior officials whose positions ranged from Assistant Director to the Director General and 231 questionnaires were completed. The qualitative aspect used semi structured questionnaires as well as individual interviews. A cross-sectional approach was adopted. The results indicated that stress levels are significant high within and outside the work environment. One of the outstanding conjectures of this study is to investigate the relationship between stress and burnout in the post-apartheid era. The study also reveals that organizational politics plays a big role in influencing stress levels which leads to burnout. The aim of the study is to make national government departments aware of the relationship between job stress and burnout as well as the role that organizational politics played amongst senior government officials, post 1994 apartheid era.

**Keywords:** Work stress; Work burnout; Staff turnover; Public sector; Senior government officials; Human resource management; Organizational politics

### Introduction

The problem of stress in the workplace is nothing new, but currently it is more complex, as extreme levels of stress is experienced by employees in the workplace [1]. Various stressors that affect job satisfaction have become a common phenomenon in present-day life, and it seems to be a global problem. Many studies have linked stress at work with poor performance, acute and chronic health problems and employee burnout, leading to high staff turnover [2,3], resulting in employees' health, occupational safety and performance being affected [4].

Research conducted on absenteeism in South Africa suggests that it would cost the country's economy R12 billion per annum. Figures of Statistics South Africa indicate that 0.7 million workers were absent from work in 2000. This is only a fraction compared to the 397% jump it took to 2012. A third of public sector workers were absent due to health reasons, compared with 9.2% within the private sector [5]. In line with the above, the present study investigates the world of work in the South African public service and how transformation and structural changes since 1994 have led to increased job stress and possible associated burnout of senior management as well as organizational politics.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a large turnover of black (African)<sup>1</sup> government officials, especially in senior positions. Many of

these officials were new to the public service and thus under pressure to ensure that service provision in the new administration and the public service took place [6]. At the same time, the state depended on its human resources to ensure such service provision [6,7]. The high pressure that is being placed on human resources has led to job stress and job burnout which leads to high turnover [6,7]. To illustrate this point, resignations among the specific government department's officials increase to 34% in 2005, 65% in 2006 and 69% in 2007 [8].

The main focus of the study is to determine the levels and factors of job stress among senior government officials, and to identify (measure) and relate them to high levels of job burnout and staff turnover in a national government department in South Africa. Furthermore, this study investigated how organizational politics influence stress and burnout amongst senior officials. It must be mentioned that currently only three such studies was found in the literature review at provincial and local government level, and none at a national level, which served as a motivation for this study.

Work stress, for the purpose of this study, is defined as any "negative environmental factors or stressors associated with a particular job" [9]. For the purpose of this study job burnout will be defined "as a syndrome of emotional, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" [10].

Organizational politics in this study is define as "those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or (disagreement) about choices" [11].

<sup>1</sup> aThe Term black African includes African, Coloured and Indian

This article is based on a bigger project where a mixed method approach was adopted as previously stated. This paper will mostly focus on the quantitative aspect of the study, while the qualitative part that deals with organizational politics will be summarized in the results section.

The study adopted the positive psychology theoretical approach that underpin the term salutogenesis which describes an approach focusing on factors that support human health and well-being, rather than on factors that causes disease (pathogenesis). More specifically, the “salutogenic model” is concerned with the relationship between health, stress and coping.

## Literature Review

Given that there are not many studies that focus on stress, burnout and organizational politics undertaken that focus on solely government departments in South Africa, the author used studies on related occupations (police, nursing, education) in state or semi-state institutions as the basis for this study’s literature overview.

The overview of literature on stress and burnout indicates that only three studies [7,12,13] investigate stress and burnout in the public sector (national, provincial and local government). Again, this is an indication of the lack of work stress and burnout studies in this area. Finally, only a small number of studies focused on middle and senior managers. While some studies examined issues of race and ethnicity, it did not critically investigate these constructs within the current political environment, specifically with regard to the structural political relations between blacks and whites in South Africa in respect of who controls the government and who controls the economy. These factors assisted in drawing up the hypothesis for the study.

Furthermore, workload plays a major part in stress and burnout amongst employees. Workload take place when a worker has too much work that he/she can handle (Moorhead and Griffen, 2006). Work overload can lead to long working hours and can influence the individual’s health. According to Maslach, et al. [14,15] there is a positive correlation between a high workload, burnout and stress. This can be attributed to the excessive demands that are required from professional people. There is an indication that workers experience more burnout when they work long working hours, when they interact a lot with customers when they carry a huge workload [14,15]. This issue will be examined in hypothesis 3 with regard to the South African government context.

More however, studies on stress and burnout in organizations indicates that poor psychological health is an important source of stress for government officials [7] and this is followed by poor physical health. Specifically, it is found that stress due to a lack of resources predict poor health [7,9]. Vogel concluded that the continuous availability of resources will lead to job enthusiasm and satisfaction, which in turn leads to organizational commitment, while a lack thereof leads to stress and job burnout. Poor psychological and physical health is a definite consequence of work stress and -burnout.

Work requirements and a lack of organizational support is another factor that influence stress and burnout [12]. These authors undertook a study, consisting of 270 employees of a local authority, to examine the relationship between job stress and burnout, as well as to determine whether sense of coherence-effect mediate job stress on burnout. It was found, with regard to job stress, that two outstanding factors (work

requirements and a lack of organizational support) backs previous research [16].

Stress due to a lack of organizational support was attributed to an insufficient salary, lack of opportunities for promotion, poorly motivated workers, and the fact that co-workers did not perform their tasks. These stressors, according Rothmann, et al. [16], can be attributed to the transformation process that took place after 1994 at local government level in South Africa. Several studies have assessed job burnout and job satisfaction in South Africa’s education system. Barkhuizen and Rothmann [17] found in their study among tertiary institutions in South Africa, that academics are experiencing high levels of academic stress related to remuneration, fringe benefits, work overload and work-life balance. These results are similar to those of Coetzee and Rothmann [18] who reported that work overload is a major source of stress for higher education staff in South Africa. The latter which leads to low morale is one of the burning issues in the current South African government and all these factors will be investigated in hypothesis 1.

Factors outside the workplace also play an important role in influencing stress and -burnout amongst workers. This range from changes in society and technological development. Political changes and the implementation of affirmative action according to Van Zyl [19] influenced the workers to such an extent that it led to higher levels of reported stress. Furthermore, the fast speed of the modern lifestyle led to a decrease in overall welfare.

Another factor that can contribute to this, is the work-home interface [20]. Work demands in high level organizations can create conflict at home and “have the potential to spill over and interfere with individuals’ personal and home lives” [20]. This can put a strain on relationships outside work and impact upon the level of stress, especially when the individual experiences a perceived lack of social support at home or from family and friends [19,20]. Steyn and Kamper [21] is furthermore of the opinion that although the home-work interface is a significant source of stress for both males and females, twice as many females reported ‘home’ as a source of stress. Many married women with young children enter the labour market and married women often carry a disproportionate share of household chores. Spouses may have egalitarian attitudes towards work and family roles, but in reality the division of labour at home continues to be unequal [21].

In line with the above-mentioned, hypothesis 2 was formulated to investigate the causes of stress outside the work on the organization.

Lastly with regard to organizational politics, work stress and -burnout reflects the literature the following way:

### Organizational politics and work stress and -burnout

According Vigoda [22], not much attention was given to the possibility of politics in organizations that can lead to stress-related effects [22,23]. Moreover, few scientific studies explain what were the additional effects related to job stress, -burnout and somatic tension [22]. The exception is the study of Cropanzano, et al. [24] that examined stress-related outcomes in the light of perceived organizational politics. It was only in the late 1990s that studies of organizational politics as a possible stressor emerged [22,24,25].

Gilmore, et al. [26] suggested that organizational stress is one source of “stress and conflict” in the work environment and has the potential to have dysfunctional effects on both the individual and organizational

level. Ferris, et al. [26-29] came to the same conclusion in studying the empirical relationship between organizational politics and work anxiety and its relation to work stress. Firstly, they argue that politics and stress are both perceptual in nature. They do not refer to reality *per se*, but to the individual's perception of reality. Secondly, according to them, stress and politics share the same characteristics of ambiguity and uncertainty. Lastly, both stress and burnout create political problems in which workers may gain or lose, depending on how they respond to the situation [26].

The study of Cropanzano, et al. [24] sought to intensively examine the relationship between organizational politics and individual-based stressors such as work stress, somatic stress and general exhaustion. Their findings showed a positive relationship between organizational politics and the above outcome variables. In conjunction with these findings the researchers also found that organizational politics are positively related to work burnout. Vigoda further emphasize that studies on work stress and -burnout have never been studied separately, probably because there seems to be a conceptual overlap between the two concepts. It is in line with this that the objective around organizational politics, work stress and -burnout was formulated in the current study.

Currently, research theory emphasizes the positive relationship between job stress, tension, anxiety, and -burnout [22]. Several studies were undertaken by Schaufeli and Bakker [15]; Rothman, et al. [12]; and Maslach, et al. [14] in respect of work burnout and various other psychological and work outcomes using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) [10,14].

As was previously indicated, organizational politics function as a potential stressor that can lead to work stress and -burnout. Furthermore, it was found by Sowmya and Panchananatham [30] that there seems to be a strong relationship between perceived organizational politics and psychological distress, depression, anxiety and work burnout among young bank managers in India. Finally, Zhang and Lee [25] found when perceived organizational politics are high in an organization, stress itself will increase and it will lead to increased worker turnover.

The above literature review clearly indicates that there is a strong relationship between organizational politics, work stress and -burnout and thereby supports the objectives of the study.

The main objectives of the study are the following: Firstly, to identify the main factors of work stress as well as the levels/intensity of work stress experienced by senior government officials within the workplace, and secondly, to determine the levels of job burnout for senior government officials.

The following hypotheses will be investigated:

- There is a correlation between the overall stress levels and the causes of stress within the work situation.
- There is a correlation between the overall stress levels and the causes of stress outside the work situation.
- There is a correlation between employee stress and job burnout and how the relationship affects senior government officials.

Lastly, the objective that organizational politics have an influence on work stress and -burnout in an organisation in a South African government Department will be examined.

## Method

### Research design

The researcher made use of a cross-sectional design by studying the relationship between work stress and -burnout and the role of organizational politics in a specific timeframe and by analyzing the cross-section carefully. A mixed method was used by using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The form of the study was descriptive by only focusing on civil servants in a specific government department and the levels of work stress and -burnout as well as organizational politics in that particular government department.

### Theoretical approach

Many people are dealing with severe stressful conditions and they do not succumb. Antonovsky thinks that the critical concept to understand how people manage stress and stay well is sense of coherence. This concept is the foundation of his salutogenic paradigm which refers to the study of the origins of health. Strümpfer suggested that Antonovsky's major concern was the origin of strength in general therefore he proposed fortigenesis referring the origin of strength is much more embracing and descriptive than salutogenesis. This study is of the assumption that the origins of strength lie in fortitude. Through our interactions with the world we develop evaluative appraisals of the self, the family and support from others, the sum of these evaluative appraisals constitutes the essence of fortitude [31].

### Sample

The target group for the quantitative aspect of the study was officials ranging from the rank of Assistant Director to Deputy Director General level. The sampling technique used in this study is convenience sampling where the entire population was used. In 2009 the organization had 341 officials from the rank of Assistant Director to Director General. The number of officials who have completed the questionnaire and participated in the study was 231 employees. As mentioned in the introductory remarks, the current study will therefore follow a positive psychological approach.

As indicated, the majority of respondents were female (60.6%) and black African (72.3%), while the average age was 38.63 years. Most officials with regard to age fall into the 26-30 and 41-45 group. Furthermore, 48.1% of the sample was married. The sample illustrates that 28.6% had an undergraduate degree in contrast with 51.9% that has a post graduate qualification, which is an indication that the senior officials were highly educated. Lastly, 66.2% of the officials are supervisors.

The sample size of the qualitative aspect of the study was 10 senior government officials which comprised of six female and four male participants. Their rank ranges from Assistant Director to Chief Director and two of the participants had an undergraduate degree while the rest possessed a post graduate qualification. Lastly they represented all four main major population groups.

### Measuring instruments

The main objective of the experience of work and life circumstances questionnaire (WLQ), which was developed by van Zyl and van der Walt [32], is measuring individuals and groups' levels of stress and gives an indication of the main causes thereof (1=never and 5=always). Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI Inventory-General Survey),

developed by Maslach, et al. [10,14] is an inventory used to assess burnout (0=never and 6=every day). An individual interview schedule based on the perceptions of organizational politics questionnaire [29] was used to get an understanding of organizational politics, stress and burnout. The biographical questionnaire will be used for the specific purpose of collecting biographical data.

**Procedure**

After the pilot study the questionnaires were distributed in 2010 accompanied by a letter signed by the Director General indicating that confidentiality will be held. Two weeks were given to respondents to complete the questionnaires.

**Statistical analysis**

The SPSS (version 21) program was used for the statistical analyses. The analysis was done mainly by making use of descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis, for example, correlations and the qualitative schedule were analysed according to themes.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance for the study was obtain from the ethics committee of the faculty of humanities from the University of Pretoria and a letter signed by the Director General of the specific department was attached to the questionnaires to inform participants that all data will be treated as confidential.

**Results**

The main factors of job stress, as well as the levels/intensity of job stress experienced by senior government officials within the workplace, are reflected in the results in Table 1. Table 1 represents the overall stress levels according to the descriptive statistics of the study.

Value	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
1	35	15.2	15.2
2	89	38.5	53.7
3	44	19	72.7
4	14	6.1	78.8
5	49	21.2	100
Total	231	100	

Codes: 1= Normal, 2= Moderate, 3=High, 4=Very High 5=Extremely High

**Table 1:** Overall stress levels of respondents.

The above results refer to perceived perceptions of the participants with regard to general stress in the project. The results showed that 15.2% of the respondents' stress levels were normal, 38.5% levels had moderate, 19% high levels of stress, 6.1% of respondents' stress levels were very high and 21.1% had extremely high stress levels. Nearly 84.8% of respondents' stress levels were above the normal cut-off point. The above responses clearly indicate that the organisation or senior officials in the organisation is experiencing stress.

In respect of the main factors of stress in the workplace, the descriptive statistics reflect the following situation as presented in Table 2.

The Table 2 represents six items with regard to causes of stress in the workplace, according to the research methodology of the experience of life circumstances questionnaire. The descriptive rank analysis in Table 2 indicates that remuneration, work benefits and personnel policies (93.1%) took the first rank option. This is followed by organizational functioning (88.3%), physical working conditions and job equipment (84.4%), professional issues and social issues (69.3%). The last item is task characteristics at 65.4%.

Sub-variable	Percentage	Rank
Organizational functioning	88.30%	2
Task characteristics	65.40%	6
Physical working conditions and job equipment	84.40%	3
Career opportunities	83.50%	4
Social matters	69.30%	5
Remuneration, fringe benefits and personnel policy	93.10%	1

Cells indicate standard alone percentages, aggregate of extremely high, very high, or high levels

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics with regard to the six stresses, main causes, within the work situation.

In the next section a general description of responses is presented of Maslach's Burnout Inventory scale, with its three separate sub scales namely exhaustion, cynicism and professional efficacy. Table 3a-3c are an indication of responses to the individual burnout scales.

Valid	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Low	58	25.1	25.1	25.1
Average	41	17.7	17.7	42.9
High	132	57.1	57.1	100
Total	231	100	100	

Codes: Values between 0.00-2.00 indicates low burnout, 2.01-3.19 indicates average burnout, and above 3.20 high burnout (Maslach, et al. 1996:48).

**Table 3a:** Ex: Exhaustion.

Valid	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Low	35	15.2	15.2	15.2
Average	48	20.8	20.8	35.9
High	148	64.1	64.1	100
Total	231	100	100	

Codes: Values between 0.00-1.00 indicates low burnout, 1.01-2.19 indicates average burnout, and above 2.20 high burnout

**Table 3b:** Cy: Cynicism.



The Tables 3 indicate that the respondents achieved high scores on both the exhaustion scale (57.1%) and the cynicism scale (64.1%) and a lower score on the professional efficacy scale (29%). These scores are therefore in line with the methodology of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, et al. (1996:21).

In other words, if individuals at a specific institution or organisation suffer from burnout, they will achieve high scores on the exhaustion and cynicism scale, while their scores on the professional efficacy scale will be low.

Valid	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Low	164	71	71	71
High	67	29	29	100
Total	231	100	100	

Codes: Values between 0.00-4.00 indicates low burnout, 4.01-4.99 indicates average burnout, and above 5.00 high burnout.

**Table 3c:** PE: Professional efficacy.

The results of hypothesis one are illustrated in Table 4.

Causes within the work situation	Statistic	Significant
Organizational functioning	Pearson correlation	-0.665**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231
Task characteristics	Pearson correlation	-0.744**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231
Physical work conditions	Pearson correlation	-0.645**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231
Career opportunities	Pearson correlation	-0.738**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231
Social matters	Pearson correlation	-0.808**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231
Remuneration, fringe benefits and personnel policy	Pearson correlation	-0.672**
	Significant (2-tailed)	0
	N	231

\*\*Correlation is significant on the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 4:** Represents a correlation of the levels of stress against causes of stress within the work environment (six factors).

There is a significant correlation between the overall stress levels and factors within the work situation, as illustrated in Table 4. More

specifically, there is a statistical significant correlation between all six factors within the workplace, namely  $p \leq 0.01$ , although it is a negative correlation. The Pearson product correlation coefficient (r) values range from -0.645 to -0.808. These values are above 0.500 which is an indication that all six factors have a strong correlation with the overall stress levels as reflected in Table 4. The highest correlation is social matters and overall stress levels with an r -value of -0.808 and lastly physical work conditions with an r -value of -0.645. The highlight of these findings is that all the results have negative correlations. This indicates that if any changes or improvement occurs with the factors within the workplace the overall stress levels will be reduced.

The H1 hypothesis with regard to the above factors as presented in Table 4 is accepted because there exist a significant statistical correlation between the overall stress levels and the six factors within the work situation. The negative correlation indicates a reverse trend among the factors, which means if any stress domain factors increase; the overall stress levels will be decrease. To summarize, if an organization experienced high stress levels amongst its employees, its management will be forced to make changes to stress factors within the work situation in order to improve the working conditions and reduce stress. The results of hypothesis 2 are outlined in Table 5.

Outside the work situation	Statistic	Significant
EW: Overall stress levels	Pearson correlation	0.875
	Sig. (2 tailed)	0.000**
	N	231

\*\*P<0.01

**Table 5:** Overall stress levels against factors outside the work situation.

Table 5 clearly indicates that there is a correlation (0.857) between the overall stress levels and causes outside the workplace. The p-value is 0.000 and it is significant at the 0.05 level. Hypothesis two is also accepted as there is a statistical significant correlation between the stress domain factor with regard to circumstances outside the workplace and the overall stress levels of employees. The probability significance value is under 0.05 ( $r=0.857$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). It therefore indicates the presence of a significant correlation between the stress domain factors outside the work situation and overall stress levels. Furthermore, it indicates a positive correlation with regard to the variables.

The result of hypothesis 3, namely overall stress levels against job burnout, is illustrated in Table 6.

Levels of Job burnout	Ex	Cy	PE	
Overall stress levels	Pearson Correlation	0.695**	0.732**	0.710* *
	Significant (2-tailed)	0.000**	0.000**	0.000* *
	N	208	205	231

\*\*P ≤ 0.01

**Table 6:** Overall stress levels against job burnout.

The result in Table 6 indicates that there is a significant correlation between overall stress and burnout. The probability values for all three

subgroups of the burnout questionnaire are 0.000 and the values are below the 0.01 significance level. It confirmed that a significant correlation exist between levels of stress and the job burnout variables. The positive signs in terms of exhaustion and cynicism indicate a positive correlation, while the negative sign with regard to professional efficacy indicates a negative correlation. The nature of the correlation between the burnout variables and the stress level is in line with the MBI burnout model. The correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) values of 0.695, 0.732, and 0.710 indicate a strong correlation between the variables. Based on the above correlation the present study supports the alternative hypothesis, that there is a significant correlation between levels of stress and job burnout. The high scores on exhaustion and cynicism are indicative of high levels of burnout, in contrast to the low scores of professional efficacy that also indicates high levels of burnout.

## Discussion

The main focus of the study is to identify (measure) the levels and factors of work stress among senior government officials, and to relate it to high levels of job burnout and staff turnover. Furthermore, to examine the relationship between work stress, -burnout and organizational politics. The study unpacked the relationship between work stress and burnout and also indicates how these two constructs presently influence each other in a South African government department, 17 years after the abolishment of Apartheid.

It was found that stress is clearly experienced amongst the target group, Assistant Director to Deputy Director General, in the organisation. This is reflected in Table 1, where the results can be summarized that almost 84.4% of respondents' stress levels are above the normal cut-off point. In a study of overall stress levels amongst correctional staff Bhoodram [33] also found that 52.9% of the officers experienced high to very high stress levels. Boemah [7], in a related study, found that psychological well-being or un-wellness is a major stress outcome for government workers in the North West provincial government. This is followed by physical health or ill health.

Further support of high levels of stress among South African managers was found by Spangenberg and Orpen-Lyall [34] in their study on stress and coping strategies. The first findings of the study found that the average score of the group of managers were within the normal range and in line with what was found by Labuschagne [34], who also made use of the WLQ. This result is also in line with the current study.

The main factors illustrating the effect of stress within the work environment is reflected in Table 2. It is significant to note that the study of Spangenberg and Open-Lyall [34] revealed that the cluster with the highest stress levels included all six stress factors within the work environment, namely; organizational functioning, task characteristics, physical working conditions, career matters, social matters and remuneration, fringe benefits and personnel policy evaluated in a more negative way, in contrast with the cluster of the low stress levels. The researcher has identified two biographical homogeneous samples within the total sample which have neutralized the masked potential of the total average score. The result is that a cluster of respondents (52) had higher levels of stress experienced than the other group, in line with the findings of Strümpfer and van Zyl [35] who found that South African managers suffer from high levels of stress. The latter is also in line with the current study as reflected in terms of stress levels reflected in Table 2. Kruger [36], by also using the WLQ found in a study on the perception of stress by employees at

different management levels, that all six stress factors occurred normal to high. Lastly, Van Den Berg and Van Zyl [37] found significant differences between the groups with regard to work characteristics, physical working conditions and remuneration (salary). These results therefore support the current study.

Hypothesis one results indicate that there is a correlation between the overall stress levels and factors within the workplace. In line with this a study on job stress and burnout in a local government [12] it was indicated, with regard to job stress, that career/work requirements and a lack of organizational support upholds the findings of previous research [16] with regard to stressors in the organizational environment. Item scores on the Work Stress Indicator survey indicated that staff had to perform tasks that are not in the job description, and the execution of other employees' tasks was the most extreme stressors associated with occupational requirements [12]. It seems further that stress due to a lack of organizational support can be attributed to inadequate salaries, lack of opportunities for advancement, weak motivated workforce and lastly, employees who do not do their work.

Hypothesis two states that there is correlation between the overall stress levels and causes of stress outside the work situation; this was supported as reflected in Table 5. With regard to stressors outside the workplace, Pienaar and van Zyl [19] indicated that black employees often face problems concerning housing facilities, residential areas, recreational facilities, transportation, technology, and a family that is not always align with respect to the work situation held by the black, middle manager. However, this did improve after 1994, but not sufficiently, as most blacks are still living in poverty and they experience more external stressors than their white counterparts [4,38].

According Van Zyl [39] worker stress not only affects the employee, but its outer effect affects other people and employees they interact with, such as his/her spouse, children and significant others in their life. Work stress appears to be related to marriage, parenting and psychological adjustment [39].

Finally, hypothesis three states that there is a correlation between work stress and -burnout, and how these affect senior government officials. Rothmann [40] found that job stress has a significant relationship with exhaustion and cynicism. These findings were in line with the study by Rothmann, et al. [41]. Rothmann [40] believes that cynicism or the withdrawal of a task can be viewed as a flexible mechanism to deal with excessive stress and the resulting feelings of exhaustion. This confirms the findings of Maslach and Leiter [14] that a work situation with overwhelming demands contributes to exhaustion. It seems that exhaustion and cynicism erode an individual's professional effectiveness.

## Qualitative discussion-organizational politics

With regard to the sub theme that "organizational politics contribute positively to the department" participants 1-9 disagree with the exception of participant 10. The following reasons were given: the department requires politics to function (participants 1, 3 and 10); officials must implement policies and they do not drive the political agenda (2, 3 and 5); appointments are made with regard to political affiliation and not the individuals capacity (participant 3); it leads to conflict, low morale and distrust (participants 6, 8 and 9); two participants believed that it leads to low performance and commitment (8 and 9); and finally, participant 10 did not believe that politics

influenced the organization and did not believe that individuals are affiliated to political parties. The main theme that stood out was that politics influenced the organization's activities. The relationship between perceptions of organizational politics, work relations and various other work outcomes was investigated by Vigoda [22]. This study also found that organizational politics negatively affects job performance which can lead to stress and burnout. The study came to the conclusion that job attitudes, the relationship between organizational politics and work outcomes (stress and burnout) mediate [22]. Tobin [42] in their study found that employees complained that managers are too politically orientated and that they want to manage the state department as a business entity. Tobin [42] has the following to say about this, "Employees experience stress when they try to meet the demands of managers who do not know the public sector and who have difficulty understanding checks and balances or other legislative constraints". The fact that the characteristics of these managers influence employee stress is an indication that political influence has a narrow link to organizational characteristics [28,43]. Again, this results are in line of existing literature.

With regard to the sub theme that "organizational politics contribute negatively to the department functions", all ten participants were in agreement (Participants 1-10). The following reasons were raised: it impacting negatively on productivity and low morale (participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9) and it leads to division and conflict (participants 3, 6, 9 and 10). Lastly, there was the matter of no consultation (participant 8). In summary it appears that the influence of organizational politics have a negative impact on the department in terms of productivity, morale, conflict and consultation which leads to stress and burnout [44,45]. These findings are in line with Vigoda et al. and Ferris and Kacmar [22,24,29].

With regard to the sub themes "which are the drivers of organizational politics", the following opinions were expressed: the main drivers are the patronage of favorites which was indicated by five participants (1, 2, 4, 9, 10) and dedication to work, opinion expressed by six participants (2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Four participants indicated the lack of information and poor communication (2, 5, 6 and 9) as drivers, while five participants identified the weak management style of supervisors (2, 5, 6, 9, and 10). Three participants indicated both political appointees (1, 3, and 10) as well as distrust (participants 4, 8 and 10). Finally, other responses include among others, recognition (4), resources (6) and jealousy (8 and 9). The significant responses in respect of this sub theme were favoritism to some workers, a lack of commitment to work and poor management style. Most of these drivers led to stress and burnout and a lack of commitment among workers [46]. The above-mentioned confirms the research undertaken by Sowmya et al. [22,24,30].

In both cases regarding the impact the contribution of organizational politics in the organization as well as the drivers of it, the answers confirmed the existing literature. In other words, the participants recognized that organizational politics played a role in stress and burnout and confirmed that the same factors that are responsible in existing literature are also reported in this study. The last objective of organizational politics, stress and burnout was addressed in this regard [47,48].

## Implications

The results of this study cannot be generalized to other departments, because the research sample was only collected from one government department. However it can also be argued that many government

departments are alike and have the same characteristics which can make the above statement questionable. However, it should be noted that only two Deputy Director General's and a limited number of Chief Directors participated in the study. Lastly, more advanced statistical techniques (e.g. structural equation modelling) could be used in future studies. It is imperative that concerted efforts are made to address these issues. Furthermore, the participants' opinions as well as the discussions on the sub themes of organizational politics in the qualitative aspect of the study reflected existing literature and confirm the relationship between work stress, -burnout and organizational politics. It is suggested that a longitudinal study needs to be undertaken in the South African national government departments to observe the effects of work stress, -burnout and organizational stress over a long period of time. It is further recommended that a larger qualitative study be planned to give a more in-depth picture with regard to the perceptions of organizational politics, work stress and -burnout.

## Theoretical contributions

One of the challenges currently experienced by the public service is to make employees' working conditions more favourable and stimulating, by maintaining good working standards and working relationships. The latter can be achieved through the establishment of programs such as stress management programs to address employees' needs and endorse the goals of the employer. The results of this study with regard to public service work stress and burnout and organizational politics have emphasized the drastic changes which the South African public service has undergone since 1994. This study stresses the role that organizational politics plays in work stress and -burnout. Moreover, the study emphasizes its impact on the levels of stress and the subsequent burnout levels of government officials on management level. The stress levels and exhaustion levels in this study are very high. The main focus of the study was to identify (measure) the levels and factors of job stress among senior government officials in a national department as well as to indicate its relation to high levels of job burnout, turnover rates and the impact of organizational politics. This objective was achieved.

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## Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

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