

## ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL DETERMINANTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CYNICISM. CYNICISM AND OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT

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**Purpose:** The aim of this review of research was to present the issue of organizational cynicism and its individual and organizational determinants. In addition, the relationship between burnout and organizational cynicism was discussed, which focused on an attempt to answer the question of whether cynicism leads to burnout or is a defensive reaction to burnout. A new direction of research was indicated, which concerns emotional predispositions that may allow for understanding this relationship. Instead, organizational cynicism is determined by individual and organizational factors, and the aim of this paper is to present findings in this area. Research conducted by scientists indicates many questions that remain unanswered. The main direction of research concerns the relationship between organizational cynicism and burnout. This topic is presented in this article.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The main research method was a critical analysis of the relationship between burnout and organizational cynicism.

**Findings:** It was found that the research that was not conducted does not provide a clear answer to the questions about the relationship between burnout and organizational cynicism. The review of research indicates the need to take into account psychological variables.

**Research limitations/implications:** The presented review of research indicates that it would be worthwhile to deepen the understanding of the emotional and behavioral component of organizational cynicism in the future. In addition, it is also advisable to search for the psychological determinants of cynical attitudes in organizations.

**Practical implications:** Research indicates that focusing on the organizational determinants of cynicism is insufficient. In understanding this phenomenon, it may be helpful to take into account the emotional sphere of employees, which accompany burnout and organizational cynicism.

**Originality/value:** A review of the research allows us to understand the need to continue research in this area, because many questions still remain unanswered. It presents the findings to date and indicates the need to include variables in emotional research.

**Keywords:** organisational cynicism, occupational burnout, types of cynicism, determinants of cynicism.

**Category of the paper:** Literature review.

## 1. Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines a cynic as ‘a person who shows a tendency to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions and tends to express this through derision and sarcasm; a sneering critic’. The concept of cynicism as a way of life emerged in ancient Greece and was treated as a virtue. It was defined as withdrawal from the world, affairs and avoidance of pleasure (Copleston, 1998).

It is most likely that the Cynics called dog sons took their name from a *gymnasium* called Cynosarges. Copleston (1998) threatens another etymology of the term. This was the unconventional life of the students of the school founded by Antisthenes, who opposed the authority of government and religion (Copleston, 1998). The concept has persisted to the present day. Cynicism is defined as a pessimistic attitude towards people's hidden and unclear goals; explaining events in a disillusioning way; and as showing concern for other people in an instrumental way to retain one's own benefits (Moutner, 1997; Tokgöz, Yılmaz, 2008).

Modern cynics are characterised by apathy and withdrawal and do not take action towards social change. They do not see the benefits in following moral rules, only limiting themselves to avoiding manipulation and malevolent authority (Kanter, Mirvis, 1989). Cynicism is no longer confined to specific groups of philosophers or schools of thought. It is considered to be present everywhere (James, 2005).

Anderson and Bateman (1997) consider a cynical person to be someone who looks only after their own interests and values them above all else without seeing the needs of others. It is also regarded as a negative attitude towards changing environmental factors.

## 2. Organisational cynicism

Organisational cynicism has been attempted to be defined as a personality trait (Cook, Medley, 1954) and as such has been regarded as a relatively constant disposition to be hostile towards the world and other people. Cynicism was expressed in the belief that other people should not be trusted (Costa, Zonderman, McCrae, Williams, 1986) because people are selfish and have bad intentions towards others (Graham, 1993 in: Dean, 1998). Graham includes among the traits of the cynical personality the perception of others as selfish, deceitful and uncommitted. Cynics, in his view, question the motives of others and are cautious, hostile and unwilling to make demands of others in interpersonal relationships. They do not exhibit friendly and helpful behaviour. They believe that being honest, kind and following the rules is not beneficial (Singelis, Hubbard, Her, An, 2003). Negative beliefs about human nature define cynicism and lead them to think negatively about their organisation. This causes them to look

for the source of their failures at work, unfulfilled expectations (no promotion, no raise) within the organisation. Cynics in the place of work distrust the motives of their leaders and believe that their employers, when given the opportunity, are going to take advantage of their efforts (Kanter, Mirvis, 1989). The results of this and related research allow for a more detailed test of cynicism and its relationship to specific managerial and organisational characteristics. As indicated by Chiaburu et al. (2013) cynicism as a trait is expected to be positively related to organisational cynicism. Organisational cynicism perceived in this way is independent of working conditions (Barefoot et al., 1989). Treating cynicism as a personality trait or stable disposition has not been confirmed by research (Guastello et al., 1992; Kanter, Mirvis, 1989; Mirvis, Kanter, 1991).

Most researchers tend to define organisational cynicism as an attitude that takes on a three-dimensional structure: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Andersson, 1996; Andersson, Bateman, 1997; Cole et al., 2006; Dean et al., 1998). Dean et al. (1998) suggest that organisational cynicism is not a personality trait, but an experienced state that can change over time depending on a particular objective.

As regards the cognitive dimension of organisational cynicism, employees believe that organisations betray them through a lack of fairness, integrity, reliability, sincerity and integrity (Özgener, Ögüt, Kaplan, 2008 in: Şen, Basım, 2005) and believe that organisations are self-interested and unscrupulous (Dean et al., 1998; Valentine, Elias, 2005).

Naus (2007) cites several studies indicating that the affective dimension of cynicism is represented by frustration and disappointment (Andersson, 1996; Andersson, Bateman, 1997) as well as pessimism (Reichers et al., 1997; Wanous et al., 1994). Andersson (1996) as an attitude characterised by disillusionment, uncertainty, anger, and distrust of institutions or individuals, groups and ideologies, as well as social skills possessed (Anderson, 1996). This definition greatly expanded the scope of cynicism explicitly by including an affective component.

The behavioural dimension of employee cynicism, on the other hand, manifests itself in perceptions of hostility in other people (Turner, Valentine, 2001), as well as distrust of groups, ideologies, social convention or institutions (Andersson, 1996; Andersson, Bateman, 1997; Turner, Valentine, 2001). Research by Anderson (1996) found that loyalty behaviour and other transcending roles decreased when former employees were cynical about the organisation.

Mirvis and Kanter (1989) define organisational cynicism by emphasising the lack of fulfilled expectations. With the formation of unrealistic high expectations comes the disappointment of not seeing them realised. Blau (1974) refers to this as 'reality shock'. Young apprentices with an idealistic attitude try to make the world a better working environment, but they are not always enabled to do so and are even hindered. They encounter neglect and even hostility from employers and customers. The focus on disappointment and growing frustration leads to the emergence of organisational cynicism (Andersson, 1996).

Moreover, management that promotes managers who treat employees badly with one-sided communication with employees can be a source of cynicism (Mirvis, Kanter, 1991).

Matrecia S.L. James (2005), on the other hand, defines organisational cynicism as an attitude associated with the employing organisation. This attitude is characterised by negative beliefs, feelings and associated behaviours. She indicates that cynicism is a type of response to situations experienced by an individual and is susceptible to change under the influence of the environment. Additionally, it is a response to a history of personal and/or social experiences that are susceptible to change by environmental influences. According to James (2005), organisational cynicism should be viewed as a negative attitude towards work rather than a fixed personality trait. When reviewing the literature, she noted that theorists distinguish five forms of cynicism:

- personal cynicism referring to enduring personality traits,
- social cynicism referring to negative emotions towards society,
- cynicism towards change refers to an employee's specific distrust of any organisational change. Reichers et al. (1997) noted that cynicism can perform many functions when it comes to organisational change. It can help to understand confusing events in their environment and serve as a defence, and cynical attitudes arise from experience and are justified when they are useful in the context of useful objectives.
- cynicism at work, which Durrah et al. (2019) considers as a component of occupational burnout,
- employee cynicism refers to the behavioural outcomes and negative attitudes of employees (Koçoglu, 2014; Durrah, 2019).

As James (2005) notes, organisational cynicism does not necessarily encompass all forms of cynicism, as individuals who display cynical attitudes do not necessarily possess a fixed personality trait termed cynicism (Andersson, Bateman, 1997; Dean et al., 1998). Most contemporary researchers rather define cynicism as an attitude of contempt of frustration and distrust (Bateman et al., 1992; 1995; Kanter, Mirvis, 1989; Mirvis, Kanter, 1992; Wanous, Reichers, Austin, 1994).

The Andersson (1996) model is the most comprehensive theoretical model (Cole et al., 2006). It takes into account agreement violations, poor communication, unfair rude treatment and management incompetence that increase the level of employee cynicism. With her model, Lynne M. Andersson (1996) noted that individual dispositions of individuals can shape attitudes of cynicism. These include self-esteem, positioning of control, sense of justice, negative emotionality, machiavellianism, cultural norms and demographic variables.

### 3. Cynicism and occupational burnout

The occurrence of cynicism in organisations is widespread. This is indicated by a number of tests conducted in the USA, Europe Asia (Kanter et al., 1989; Durrah et al., 2019). The attitude of cynicism develops on similar grounds as occupational burnout, but with regard to a specific company rather than society or profession (Andersson, 1996; Maslach, Leiter, 1997; Macko, Łaciak, 2012). Strong negative emotions resulting from uncertainty of company rules, loss of meaning in work, suspicion of supervisors and disillusionment with tasks lead to decreased satisfaction with participation in the organisation, discouragement, exhaustion, emotional alienation and a sense of exclusion from the work environment (Abraham, 2000).

A number of factors are mentioned that can lead to cynicism at work and generate strong negative emotions. Cem Şen and H. Nejat Basım distinguish two types of factors determining the emergence of organisational cynicism: individual and organisational. The former refer to demographic variables:

- Age, gender, marital status and educational level (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Mirvis, Kanter, 1991). It is emphasised that ineffective national and inter-national institutions lead to disillusionment with injustice resulting from exclusion based on gender, race, education, background, disability or income (Macko, Łaciak, 2012). Mirvis and Kanter (1989) point out that the result is the development of a cynical attitude towards the employing organisation.
- Duration of employment (James, 2005).

Organisational reasons include a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioural factors:

- Andersson (1996) argues for the distinction of three factors. In his view, psychological contract violations and perceived contract violations are the main determinants of employee cynicism. He argues that the formulation of unrealistically high expectations; the experience of disappointment with the non-fulfilment of these expectations; and the subsequent disappointment leads to negative attitudes and behaviour, as unfulfilled expectations are the primary focus of contract violations (Andersson, 1996). Similarly Abraham finds that psychological contract violation is an important predictor of the occurrence of organisational cynicism (Abraham, 2000). As Abugre (2017) points out, cynicism in the place of work can result from violations of the psychological contract model and ultimately lead to an intention to change. This is why in his opinion it is so important to implement appropriate practices and policies that encourage effective relationships between co-workers, especially those related to adherence to the psychological contract in order to avoid progressive cynicism.

Organisational determinants of cynicism include:

- Selfish behaviour: power struggles, which often involves a lack of integrity (Davis, Gardner, 2004).
- Lack of support from the organisation (Fleming, 2005; Wanous et al., 2000).
- Lack of trust. Trust is indicated to play a key role in enhancing employee engagement and nurturing a supportive and collaborative work environment (Addison, Teixeira, 2020). It is based on the legibility of decision-making rules and open and honest communication (Bowen et al., 2016). Employees with higher levels of trust are shown to have positive attitudes towards the organisation and exhibit less cynical behaviour (Ozyilmaz et al., 2018; Singh, Srivastava, 2013 in: Khan, Firmansyah, 2024). Khan and Firmansyah's (2024) research supports the notion that an organisational environment in which employees perceive procedural and process justice results in a tangible reduction in their cynicism, fostering a positive and cooperative work environment.
- Lack of consistency between policy and practice, unethical behaviour (Dean et al., 1998),
- Lack of integrity (Dean et al, 1998),
- Organisational social responsibility and unfair remuneration policies, excessive working hours, organisational rules including bullying and poor management (Cartwright, Holmes, 2006).
- Role conflict and role ambiguity stems from the perceived contradiction and imbalance between the demands society places on them and the few resources they are given to do their jobs (Meyerson, 1990; Andersson, 1996),
- Poor communication, ineffective leadership and lack of respect for employees (Cole et al., 2006),
- Restructuring, downsizing and redundancies cause employees to experience a lack of meaningful work and have an unmet need for self-fulfilment (Abraham, 2000; Andersson, 1996; Andersson, Bateman, 1997; Bateman et al., 1992). Naus (2007) emphasises that the exchange relationship between employees and the organisation is then disturbed. Naus refers to the observations of Cartwright and Holmes (2006), who noted that organisations expect more from their employees and provide nothing but work or employment opportunities,
- Low organisational performance (Andersson, Bateman, 1997),
- Management failure to implement change and lack of staff involvement (Andersson, 1996; Ferres, Connell, 2004).

The consequences of organisational cynicism include a decline in organisational commitment, motivation and job satisfaction (Abraham, 2000; Turner, Valentine, 2001; Wanous et al., 1994, 2000; Urbany, 2005), an increase in suspicion, distrust and contempt of the organisation (Kanter, Mirvis, 1989, 1991) and other forms of psychological disengagement

and detachment (Guastello et al., 1992; Andersson, 1996; Feldman, 2000; Johnson, O'Leary, 2003; Fleming, 2005).

A growing problem seen in organisations is emotional exhaustion characterised by chronic emotional and interpersonal stress at work (Lahana et al., 2017). It results from excessive emotional demands from the organisation on the employee that the employee is unable to handle, resulting in depletion of emotional resources (Liu et al., 2020; Schaufeli, Buunk, 2003). Atalay (2022) suggests that emotional exhaustion lowers identification with the organisation and employees then withdraw from the organisation to preserve their emotional resources and protect themselves from further exhaustion. They further conclude that their beliefs do not align with the organisation, which reduces their trust in the organisation, and triggers cynicism (Chiaburu et al., 2013). In this case, cynicism acts as a defence mechanism to protect against occupational burnout. Cynicism is characterised by a negative attitude towards the organisation whereas trust in the organisation is expressed in a positive attitude towards it and impartiality towards it. Some researchers situate cynicism and distinctiveness on one continuum although some researchers have emphasised their distinctiveness (Dean et al., 1998). Chiaburu (2013) conducting meta-analyses found that cynicism and trust are strongly related but are still separate constructs. Meta-analyses showed that positive affectivity is negatively related to organisational cynicism, while negative affectivity and cynicism as a trait are positively related to this outcome. Organisational cynicism is enhanced by individual negative emotionality and trait cynicism and reduced by positive affectivity.

Research by Ahmed et al. (2024) highlighted the key role of organisational cynicism in mediating the relationship between toxic leadership and undesirable deviant behaviour in the workplace.

Occupational burnout is a metaphor commonly used to describe a state of mental fatigue occurring as a response to chronic stress. It was thought to apply to employees working with people (Maslach, Schaufeli, 1993). Nowadays, it is already accepted that it concerns occupations not exclusively related to service with other people (Maslach, Leiter, 1997). There are three dimensions of occupational burnout. The first is emotional exhaustion, the second is cynicism manifested by distancing oneself from one's work and the third dimension is a lack of achievement at work.

Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli (2001) note that physical demands at work, such as time pressure, shift work are associated with exhaustion, while the lack of work resources such as performance feedback, job control, participation in decision-making, social support is associated with withdrawal, which is identified with cynicism (cf. Schaufeli, Bakker, 2004). Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) research managed to observe that negative psychological states, i.e. occupational fulfilment (which in their view consists of emotional exhaustion and cynicism) and positive psychological states such as work engagement play a similar role in quite different processes. The former act as a mediator in the energetic process between high

demands and health problems. Involvement, on the other hand, mediates the relationship between available resources and organisational attachment.

In a study by Margaretha Viljoen and Nicolaas Claassenb (2017), cynicism was positively related to stress, as confirmed by an increase in cynicism as stress levels increased. A positive correlation was also found between cynicism and anxiety as a trait, but not anxiety as a state. This suggests that people who are more prone to stress and worry are also more likely to become cynical. It has been indicated that an increase in anxiety symptoms has previously been linked to cynicism, and this has been linked to occupational burnout, with cynicism seen as a causal factor (Ding, 2014). Margaretha Viljoena and Nicolaas Claassenb (2017) suggest that a tendency to worry and stress predisposes to cynicism, and that cynicism may favour the development of anxiety.

Research by Fatimah A. Altamimi et al (2021) verified the mediating role of occupational burnout. The researchers indicate that organisational support reduces both occupational burnout and cynicism. The research results also indicate a relationship between occupational burnout and organisational cynicism. It has also been confirmed that occupational burnout plays a mediating role in the relationship between organisational support and organisational cynicism.

Christina Maslach & Susan E. Jackson (1982), on the other hand, points out that the psychological and physiological consequences of organisational cynicism manifest themselves as emotional exhaustion, which essentially consists of the depletion of affective energy or resources and is characterised by physical and emotional breakdown. Cynicism is positively related to stress which confirms that cynicism increases with stress levels and ultimately causes burnout (Maslach et al., 1996; James, 2005). The concept of cynicism is similar to the depersonalisation dimension of the occupational burnout concept. It can be presented as a state of extreme physical or mental fatigue (exhaustion), a cynical attitude towards work and a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively in relation to job performance (Maslach, Jackson, Leiter, 1996).

Pamela Brandes and Diya Das (2006) disagree with this approach. In their view, there are several key differences. The researchers believe that depersonalisation as a component of occupational burnout cannot be regarded as a manifestation of organisational cynicism. Both concepts are characterised by a derisive attitude towards others, with depersonalisation being a concept that refers to customers and recipients of the employee's services. Organisational cynicism, on the other hand, is a negative attitude towards the employing organisation and the senior management of the organisation. In addition, they point out that organisational cynicism does not exclude professional commitment. In the case of occupational burnout, employees have a negative perception of their own performance as well as a denial of the value of their profession. Differences are also marked at the affective level. Disappointment and frustration are observed in both cases, but the objective of these emotions is different. Professionally burned-out people react negatively towards colleagues or themselves. Organisational cynicism on an emotional level refers to the company's management.



These concepts are thought to encompass negative emotions, but have a different objective. Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly (2003) found that (affective) organisational cynicism predicts a subscale of emotional exhaustion. If we consider the behavioural level, occupational burnout is characterised by employees' withdrawal from organisational life, whereas in the case of organisational cynicism, employees may take a more defensive stance by verbally opposing actions (Dean et al., 1998). Furthermore, the effects associated with occupational burnout are usually detrimental, but organisational cynicism can have a positive effect on the employee.

Brandes and Das (2006) noted the non-linear nature of the relationship between cynicism and performance. Moderate levels of cynicism can improve performance because it serves as a coping mechanism and, despite disappointment and frustration, does not lead to behaviours that might reduce performance at work (Johnson, O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). In contrast, low and high levels of cynicism are negatively related to performance. According to Brandes and Das (2006), employee cynicism may be a result of their critical appraisal of their work and may be a force for change in the organisation (Brandes, Das, 2006).

A large body of research suggests that cynicism is negatively related to both job performance and prosocial behaviour (Bakker et al., 2004, Demerouti et al., 2005). Research by Leiter (1993), found that emotional exhaustion leads to a cynical attitude as a coping strategy. It was also found that professional ineffectiveness also triggered a cynical coping strategy. Therefore, cynicism may mediate between emotional exhaustion and job performance and prosocial behaviour. This was confirmed in research by Bang and Reio (2017). Their research showed that the three components of burnout were negatively related to task performance, contextual performance and prosocial behaviour. Cynicism was also found to mediate the relationship between emotional exhaustion, ineffectiveness and task performance, contextual performance and prosocial behaviour.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Research on organisational cynicism in relation to occupational burnout is complex, as it shows that cynicism can be captured as one of the factors of occupational burnout and is then also treated as a defence mechanism against occupational burnout. On the other hand, some researchers indicate that organisational cynicism has a significant impact on emotional exhaustion, one of the main elements of occupational burnout (Abraham, 2000.) A sense of organisational injustice also leads to an increase in cynicism that in turn influences a higher risk of occupational burnout (Chiaburu, Peng, Van Dyne, 2011).

Besides, it should be noted that research on organisational cynicism to date has been mainly on organisational predictors of its emergence. However, it is advisable to look for some individual dispositions that make certain working conditions in some individuals induce less

undesirable psychological consequences including the emergence of organisational cynicism. It is likely that employees' emotional reactions may play an important role in shaping high or low levels of employee cynicism. However, there are few reports on this topic. According to the affective event theory (AET) of Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) to which Cole et al. (2004) refer, emotional reactions are the channel through which conditions in the place of work, and even the dispositions of individuals, influence work attitudes (Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996). Research by Cole (2004) indicates that emotions are not the end result but serve as a generative mechanism for the relationship between supervisor support and toughness and employee cynicism. They indicate that, for example, anger, worry or frustration may contribute to increased levels of psychological withdrawal and cynicism (Perrewé, Zellars, 1999). Likewise, feelings of guilt may help explain why some downsizing survivors reported elevated levels of cynicism (Kalimo et al., 2003).

The presented review of research shows the spectrum of considerations and studies that have been conducted, but also allows us to notice many areas that require deepening. Organizational cynicism is a cognitive, emotional and behavioral construct. The most space was devoted to the study of cynicism in its cognitive and emotional dimensions. It is noted that also taking into account the behavioral level could allow for a better understanding of organizational cynicism. Also, taking into account the consequences of organizational cynicism, which Şen, C., & Basım, H.N. (2023) talk about, such as: fraud, decreased motivation, emotional burnout, a sense of ignorance, etc., it seems reasonable to look for the psychological determinants of these problems. It is noted that cognitive competences can protect against fraud, but also greater distrust, which characterizes a cynical attitude, can hinder the acquisition of knowledge. It is a paradox that cynicism goes hand in hand with intelligence, but such a relationship was not found in the research of Stavrova, O. and Ehlebracht, D. (2018).

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