Arresting burnout: The role of Karma yoga

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ABSTRACT

An outcome of aversive working conditions, burnout remains a prime cause of concern for organizational researchers. Arresting burnout in the workforce is important as it is associated with numerous negative consequences for employees as well as organizations. One of the prominent approach that explains the incidence of burnout is the conservation of resources which advocates that burnout results when individuals perceive net loss of valuable resources which cannot be replenished. In this paper, we propose Karma Yoga as a panacea to the problem of burnout. Karma Yoga is suggested in the Hindu text Bhagavad Gita as one of the ways towards Self-realization. Karma Yogis (practitioners of Karma Yoga) are likely to interpret ‘loss’ of resources as milestones in the path of self-realization rather than reflections of personal capabilities, thereby preventing them from experiencing burnout. They are also likely to be happy. Further, our findings suggest that happiness mediates the relationship between Karma Yoga and Burnout.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Burnout, Conservation of Resources, Happiness, Karma Yoga.
ARRESTING BURNOUT: 
THE ROLE OF KARMA YOGA

INTRODUCTION

Recently it has been observed that high profile executives in India are increasingly succumbing to heart attack. For e.g. Mr. Ranjan Das, the then Managing Director of SAP India passed away only at the age of 42. Similarly, Sunil Mehta, vice president of India’s IT industry body, NASSCOM, passed away at the age of 41, while Mr. Arun Kumar, Chairman of Flextronics Software Systems, passed away at the age of 57. This has traumatized the Indian industry to say the least. Questions are being asked whether long hours and frequent travel between different time zones have made many executives susceptible to such fragile health (Economic Times, 2009). Voluminous research populates literature offering solutions to cope with such negative work experiences (Bickford, 2005; Mark & Smith, 2011; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), yet very little is seen helping individuals. In contrast, the number of employees who are experiencing their jobs more negatively (often fatally) is rising within the Indian workplaces.

An oft used framework to understand such negative work experiences of employees is job burnout, which has been defined as “a stress syndrome in response to the job”, that manifests as emotional exhaustion; feelings of diminished personal accomplishment; and depersonalization from co-workers, customers, and administrators (Maslach et al. 2001). However, recently there has been a growing appreciation among researchers that emotional exhaustion is the central,

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4India’s National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), is the premier trade body for the Information Technology – Business Process Management (IT & BPM) sector in India. A not-for-profit organization, it has over years emerged as an important, authentic, and powerful voice of this industry. Further it is also considered as the single reference point for all information on IT industry in India. For more information on NASSCOM, one may like to visit http://www.nasscom.in/.
dominant, and most significant component of burnout (e.g., Burke & Richardsen, 1993; Pines, 2005). Accordingly, Pines & Aronson (1988) viewed burnout as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. It is an extended reaction to prolonged emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. Researchers have identified a number of negative outcomes to be associated with job burnout. For e.g. Lee & Ashforth (1996) found the construct to be negatively associated with organization commitment and job satisfaction. Similarly, Nahrgang, Morgeson & Hofmann (2010) discovered that negative outcomes like accidents and injuries share a positive relationship with burnout. Likewise, burnout was found to correlate with poor health and with associated symptoms such as headaches, nervousness, and backaches (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

One stream of research in the burnout literature deals with how absence of resources with an individual can lead to her/his burnout. Labelled as the conservation of resources (COR) approach to understand burnout, it advocates that burnout results when individuals perceive net loss of valuable resources which cannot be replenished (Shirom, 1989). Expanding this thesis by centering his argument on the core of COR, i.e. primacy of loss, Hobfall (1989) contends that workers are more sensitive to workplace events that results in losses for them. In order to limit the loss effects, individuals actively participate in coping efforts, thereby investing further resources. In this process, unless there is a resource gain to compensate for the experienced resource loss, individuals undergo further resource depletion with increased intensity and speed, for resources are interrelated (Westman et al., 2004). The individual thus enters a loss spiral leading to an ultimate heightened state of resource scarcity, labelled as burnout. In summary, if the rate by which work demands deplete resources is faster than their replenishment, burnout results in the long term (Freedy & Hobfall, 1994).
Individuals attempt to cope with such situations of stress by rebalancing their resources and demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to COR, one of the ways by which individuals may do so is re-evaluating the value of resources which are likely to be lost or gained (Hobfall, 1989). In fact, this has been believed to be “the most simple course for people, because rather than combating the stressor or enduring the stress, people could merely alter their interpretation of events and consequences” (Hobfall, 1989). We contend that the practice of Karma Yoga (“Karma” in Sanskrit translates to “action”, while “yoga” is understood as “device”, Mulla & Krishnan, 2006) would simplify the reappraisal of lost resources, thereby helping individuals cope with stress relatively easily.

**KARMA YOGA AND BURNOUT**

Rastogi & Pati (2015) define Karma Yoga “as a persistent positive state of mind that is characterized by *absorption* and *service consciousness*”. According to them absorption is a state of deep engrossment in one’s work, a state of transcendence and a loss of time consciousness, as well as a state of total attention where all mental resources are engaged, while service consciousness is characterized by a concern, that manifests from a deep conviction about the interconnectedness of the beings in the Universe, to look after the welfare of others selflessly. Being service conscious amounts to being sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, being compassionate, and being immersed in a desire to work ambitiously and intelligently, not for oneself but for others. Karma Yoga originally finds mention in the Bhagavad Gita, which apart from being a concise description of Hindu philosophy, is increasingly being recognized by researchers as an eternal source of wisdom in many fields such as psychiatry (Jeste & Vahia, 2008), management, administration, and leadership (Sharma, 1999). However, academic research involving the construct is fairly recent with researchers finding it positively associated with
transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, and spirituality (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007, 2008, and 2009). Similarly, Srirangarajan & Bhaskar (2011) assert that the practice of Karma Yoga will result in a win-win situation for the employees and the organization. While organization gains in higher productivity and performance, employees experience job satisfaction, personal growth, and fulfilment.

Pande & Naidu (1992) caution that Karma Yoga⁵ ought not to be understood as a goalless endeavor. Instead, it has a very distinct goal of self-realization⁶. According to them, being a Karma Yogi (one who practices Karma Yoga) involves replacing the aspiration of more familiar and common goals with the aspiration of less familiar and less common ones. Often the goal is fixed inwards, with the individual engaged in recognizing the spiritual value of her/his material actions, with the expended resources and the consequences (positive or negative) being reappraised as milestones in the path of self-realization rather than reflections of personal capabilities. Thus Karma Yoga relieves its practitioners from anxiety while enabling them to meaningfully reconstruct even those experiences that can be described as damaging (Pande & Naidu, 1992). It fixes their attention on the eventual goal of self-realization while ‘blinding’ them to the net loss of resources, thereby preventing them from experiencing burnout. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1): Karma Yoga is negatively associated with job burnout.*

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⁵ Pande & Naidu (1992) have actually used the term *anasakti*, or desire-less action to indicate Karma Yoga in their study. This is not surprising for the Bhagavad Gita identifies Karma Yoga through numerous terms, *niskamakarma* being another. Pande & Naidu’s (1992) description of *anisakti action* is in line with the definition of Karma Yoga elaborated in this study. They define it as an intense, though disinterested action, performed with a spirit of dispassion, without nurturing concerns about success or failure, loss or gain, likes or dislikes. It is that state where the actor has understood that her/his concerns lie only in actions and not in their results, that actions should not serve any personal motives.

⁶ Self-realization may be understood as being whole or the unification of body, mind and the spirit. Being self-realized means being aware of one’s own true identity – the authentic self. Yoga as a traditional practice helps reach a self-realized state by helping the practitioners transcend their ego (White, 2009).
KARMA YOGA AND HAPPINESS

Boehm & Lyubomirsky (2008) describe a happy person as someone who frequently experiences positive emotions, such as joy, satisfaction, contentment, enthusiasm, and interest. It must be recognized that intense positive emotions as well as low grade but frequent positive emotions do not predict happiness. Rather, the experience of slight to moderate positive emotions most often has been found to be a strong predictor of judgments of happiness. Happiness has been found to relate with social support from colleagues and supervisors, income, favorable evaluations by a superior, job satisfaction, as well as decision making and interpersonal relationship (mentioned in Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Karma Yoga has been previously argued to ‘blind’ individuals to their net loss of resources, treating each expense of resource as an investment in one’s spiritual journey to the super ordinate personal goal of self-realization (Pande & Naidu, 1992). Accordingly, we argue that such individuals remain immune to intense positive emotions (resulting from gain of resources) or loss of it (resulting from loss of resources). Rather, we argue that they remain receptive to moderate positive emotions (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008), which results from their re-evaluation of various losses and gains. Since Boehm & Lyubomirsky, (2008) had associated moderate emotions to be a strong predictor of happiness, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Karma Yoga is positively associated with happiness.

HAPPINESS AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN KARMA YOGA AND BURNOUT

According to Broaden & Build (B & B) Theory, positive emotions not only make people feel good in specific moments of time but are also instrumental in predicting future wellbeing (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). Specifically, they “broaden thought-action repertoires by inducing
exploratory behaviors that create learning opportunities and goal achievement, and help to build enduring resources. Thus, by experiencing positive emotions, people enhance their resources, which, in turn, may lead to a more enduring positive state of wellbeing, for instance, work engagement” (Ouweneel et al., 2012). Alternatively, it also means that positive emotions may help reduce negative state of wellbeing at work, like burnout. In fact, happy people were found to exhibit less burnout (Iverson et al., 1998) and less emotional exhaustion (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Since Karma Yoga is argued to be negatively associated with job burnout (H 1) and positively with happiness (H 2), and happiness is associated negatively with burnout, there may exist a possibility that happiness mediates the relationship between Karma Yoga and burnout. Accordingly we hypothesize,

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Happiness mediates the relationship between Karma Yoga and job burnout.

Fig. 1 summarizes the hypotheses.

**FIGURE 1: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

![Research Framework Diagram](image)
METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants comprised of 207 working professionals who were participants in various executive education programs in two premier management institutes of India. After assuring them of anonymity (both verbally as well as through an accompanying written note), they were requested to participate in a survey that comprised of items measuring the constructs of interest in this study. The mean age of the participants was calculated to be 37.42 years (SD: 6.52 years, minimum age: 27 years and maximum age: 57 years), while about 14% of the respondents were determined to be females. Moreover, 58% of the respondents had an undergraduate degree, while 36% had a Master’s Degree. 4% had a research degree (M. Phil./PhD). The remaining participants did not reveal their educational qualification. The respondents were fairly evenly distributed across public and private sectors. While 49% of the respondents were drawn from the public sector, the remaining were from private organizations representing varied sectors (Information and Communication Technology: 20%, Oil Refinery: 12%, Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction: 5%; Banking and Financial Services: 5%; Pharma& Clinical Research: 5%; Automotive sector: 3%). 1% of the respondents did not mention their industry/ line of work.

Instruments

*Karma Yoga (KY)*: We measured Karma Yoga using the 6-item instrument (KY-6) developed by Rastogi, Pati & Kumar (2015). The measure taps into the two components of Karma Yoga, i.e. *absorption* (a state of deep engrossment in one’s work) and *service consciousness* (being immersed in a desire to work ambitiously and intelligently, not for oneself but for others). Each of
the dimensions are assessed with three items. The instrument asks the participants on how frequently they feel the way as described by the items and solicited their responses on a 7-point Likert continuum (1 - Never, 7 – Always). A sample item measuring absorption is “While working, I am completely focused on the task at hand”. Similarly a sample item measuring service consciousness is, “I do all I can to support others”.

*Happiness (HAP):* Happiness was assessed with the 4-item Short Happiness Scale (SHS) developed by Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999). The instrument is anchored on the subjectivist approach to happiness, i.e. it believes that the ultimate judge of happiness should be “whoever lives inside a person’s skin” (Myers & Diener, 1995). Accordingly, individuals were asked to make an overall, “molar” judgement of the extent to which they are happy or unhappy people (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). They were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale. A sample item reads, “In general I consider myself __ (1 – Not a very happy person, 7 – A very happy person)”

*Job Burnout (JBO):* Pines (2005) developed the 10-item Short Burnout Questionnaire (SBOQ) as a response to a need for shorter version of burnout measures. The instrument was designed to capture the essence of an individual’s physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, and mental exhaustion (Pines & Aronson, 1988) at work. The items of SBOQ – 10 were to be responded on a 7 point Likert scale (1 – Never, 7 – Always). A sample item includes “Depressed”.

**ANALYSES AND RESULTS**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlation matrix for the above variables, with reliability coefficients (measured through Cronbach’s \( \alpha \)) on the diagonal. Overall, respondents reported themselves as highly happy, less burnt out and highly Karma Yogic.
TABLE 1
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, CORRELATIONS, AND SCALE RELIABILITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Absorption (ABS)</td>
<td>17.09</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>(0.735)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Service Consciousness (SC)</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>(0.707)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Karma Yoga (KY)</td>
<td>34.23</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.85**</td>
<td>0.88**</td>
<td>(0.789)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Happiness (HAP)</td>
<td>21.57</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>(0.776)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Job Burnout (JBO)</td>
<td>28.49</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.21**</td>
<td>-0.53**</td>
<td>(0.900)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: p < 0.01 (one tailed); Cronbach’s α in diagonals within bracket

The individual Karma Yoga components (i.e. absorption and service consciousness) are related to each other ($r_{ABS-SC} = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and to the overall measure ($r_{ABS-KY} = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$; $r_{SC-KY} = 0.88$, $p < 0.01$) in the ways that would be expected. As per our expectations, job burnout was found to be negatively associated with Karma Yoga ($r_{KY-JBO} = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$), thus lending support to Hypothesis 1 (H1). However, it must be mentioned here that of the components of Karma Yoga, only absorption related negatively with job burnout ($r_{ABS-JBO} = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$), while service consciousness was unrelated ($r_{SC-JBO} = -0.12$, ns).
Moving further, Hypothesis 2 (H2) stated that Karma Yoga would be positively associated with happiness. The correlations between each of the Karma Yoga components and happiness was found to be positive ($r_{ABS-HAP} = 0.23, p < 0.01; r_{SC-HAP} = 0.32, p < 0.01$). In addition, happiness was also found to be associated positively with the total score of Karma Yoga ($r_{KY-HAP} = 0.32, p < 0.01$), thereby providing support for H2.

Next, Hypothesis 3 (H3) stated that happiness would mediate the relationship between Karma Yoga and job burnout. In order to investigate for mediation, we employed the procedure suggested by Baron & Kenny (1986). This method includes three steps, done separately for each dependent variable. First, the mediator (happiness) is regressed on the independent variable (Karma Yoga). If a significant association is observed, then the dependent variable (job burnout) is regressed on the independent variable (Karma Yoga). Again, if a significant association is noticed, then a final regression equation is calculated. Here the dependent variable (job burnout) is regressed on the independent and the mediator variables (i.e. Karma Yoga and happiness respectively) simultaneously. The mediator must still predict the dependent variable in the third equation. But if the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in the third equation is smaller than the relationship observed in the second equation, then a partial mediation is inferred. However, if the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in the third equation becomes non-significant, then full mediation is said to hold.

Since the $\beta$ for a variable in a single independent variable equation is equivalent to the zero-order correlation between the independent and dependent variables, the correlation coefficients in Table 1 (i.e. $r_{KY-HAP}$ and $r_{KY-JBO}$) can be used for the first two steps. The results of the third step are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, full support for H3 exists in the form of complete mediation (Table 2), with the model explaining 28.2% of variance in burnout. The $\beta$
between Karma Yoga and job burnout in the third step is non-significant. In other words, it can be inferred that happiness mediates the relationship between Karma Yoga and job burnout.

**TABLE 2: MEDIATION ANALYSIS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step No.</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Standardized β</th>
<th>Adjusted R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>Karma Yoga</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>Karma Yoga</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>Karma Yoga</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td>0.282 (F statistic = 41.64*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>-0.524*</td>
<td>0.524*</td>
<td>41.64*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: p < 0.05 (one tailed); For Step No. 1 and 2 the standardized β are the zero order correlations between the variables (Refer Table 1 for the values)

**Common method variance**

Most researchers are in agreement that common method variance is a significant problem in behavioral science research, thanks to extensive employment of self-report inventories. Although various initiatives (e.g. anonymity of respondents and counterbalancing item orders, Podsakoff et al. 2003) were incorporated during the design of this study for limiting the effect of common method variance on the results, yet a statistical proof shall help increase the confidence on the findings. Thereby we conducted the Harman’s single factor test, which is popular among researchers to address this issue (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Accordingly, we conducted an exploratory factor analyses where we forced the items of the three study constructs to load on a single factor. The resulting single factor explained 34.40% of the variance, thereby allaying apprehensions of common method variance contaminating the results.
DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between Karma Yoga and burnout. Further, this study also intended to examine if happiness mediates the relationship between the above mentioned constructs. The data revealed that the practice of Karma Yoga helps generate positive emotions in individuals which in turn reduces negative state of wellbeing at work, like burnout. All the three study hypotheses were supported. Our findings are in line with the findings of Pande & Naidu (1992), who reported a negative association between anashakti (i.e. Karma Yoga) and distress (r = -0.14, p < 0.01). Moreover our findings also improvised upon their results by suggesting a mediation pathway that enriches our understanding on the relationship between Karma Yoga and a negative state of wellbeing at work (i.e. burnout).

Our conclusions help advance the theoretical boundaries of the Conservation of Resource Theory. Consistent with its central premise that prevention of loss of resources will help averting stress (Hobfall, 1989; Westman et al. 2005), there have been propositions that thwarting of satisfaction of individual desires (can be also understood as resources) leads to stress (see Pande & Naidu, 1992). Housten (1987) elaborates desires to be a longing for something one does not possess or guarding something one possesses. Desires thus originate from attachment (Pande & Naidu, 1992), which when threatened drives individuals to spend more resources and hence experience stress. Coping with such stress is contingent upon the individual’s personal theory of reality, which may structure his experience and direct behavior (Epstein, 1984). Our study findings help posit Karma Yoga as a method through which attachment to material world (and associated resources) can be minimized while focusing on the intrinsic value of action. It helps in shifting attention to what is gained rather than what is lost (Hobfall, 1989). Thus the Karma Yogi is focused on self-development, recognizing every event, irrespective of the nature of consequences, as a step
closer to the ultimate goal of self-realization. Further, Scheier, Weintraub & Carver (1986) had reported that optimism is positively associated with the coping dimension of positive reinterpretation (r = 0.23, p < 0.001). Accordingly, Karma Yoga may be additionally viewed as the Indian equivalent of state optimism. Thus the Karma Yogi will relatively remain unruffled when faced with stressors, well aware that these contribute to his personal development.

From a practitioner’s perspective, it is evident from the findings that when individuals absorb themselves in duties beneficial towards others, without hankering after personal outcomes of their actions, they receive happiness, which helps them achieve a stress-free life. Therefore Karma Yoga needs to be incorporated into leadership selection criteria and also into education for leadership development (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008), especially considering the immense psychological, physical, emotional and work related demands Indian business leadership is experiencing in recent times. It will go a long way in immunizing them against stress and its related consequences in their lives.

In the end, our study suffers from various limitations. First, it employs only a single measure of Karma Yoga (i.e. Rastogi, Pati & Kumar, 2015), while there are other conceptualizations of the construct and associated measures\(^7\) (e.g. Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003; Menon & Krishnan, 2004; Mulla & Krishnan, 2006; Mulla & Krishnan, 2007; Mulla & Krishnan, 2008; Mulla & Krishnan, 2014). It is difficult to say whether the mediation model established in our study will remain unchanged upon replacing the measure of Karma Yoga. Second, all the variables studied are self-reported, inviting concerns for common method variance corrupting the

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\(^7\) Although the references to various other conceptualizations and associated measures of Karma Yoga are provided here, yet it must be mentioned that all of these have either insufficient number of items or reported a Cronbach $\alpha$ that is unacceptable. For a detailed critique of these measures please refer Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar (2015). In fact this is one of the principal reasons that motivated us to embrace the conceptualization of Karma Yoga forwarded by Rastogi & Pati (2015) on which the employed measure is based upon.
study findings. Although our results on Harman’s single factor test largely rules out such concerns, yet it must be appreciated that measurement of non-verifiable data, like personality traits, behavior, feelings, attitudes and perceptions, may be still erroneous due to lower self-awareness among the respondents (Wohlers & London, 1989). Thus Podsakoff et al (2003) suggest the use of independent sources for predictor and criterion variables. Accordingly, future studies should try to incorporate peer/supervisor reported measures or try for experimental verification of the hypotheses. Finally, the use of English language in communicating the survey instruments could have been a possible drawback. Since English is not the native language of Indians, there exists a possibility that the respondents had misunderstood and misconstrued the items, thereby leading to erroneous responses.
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