Exhaustion and job satisfaction among internal and external outplacement counsellors

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Abstract

When organisations make employees redundant, they increasingly offer outplacement counselling to them, either in-house or as a service of specialised companies. Despite outplacement counsellors' importance, their work-related stress has not been studied yet. In this paper we argue that internal (in-house) outplacement counsellors have a particularly demanding job (especially because being employed by firing organisations should increase role conflicts among internal outplacement counsellors) and they should thus be more emotionally exhausted than external outplacement counsellors. Data from 98 German outplacement counsellors supported this argumentation. Mediation analyses showed that these differences were mediated by increased role conflicts, consistent with role theory arguments. The same effect was found for counsellors' job satisfaction. These results help understanding the stress that outplacement counsellors experience.

Keywords: burnout; outplacement counseling; role conflicts; job satisfaction; stress

Introduction

Although the job of a counsellor can be highly rewarding because counsellors help those in need, the job can also be stressful because counsellors have to be emotionally engaged and empathically listen to clients and their frequently distressful stories (Moore et al., 2020). In fact, there is a now considerable research on stress among counsellors in several countries (e.g., Ender et al., 2019; Fye et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 2017; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006), showing that emotional exhaustion and other burnout symptoms are fairly common among counsellors. Knowing more about the stressful side of the counsellors' job is important because this could help preventing turnover among counsellors and developing interventions that ease their stress.

Although research on counsellors' stress has covered a wide range of counselling settings (see, e.g., Bride & Kintzle, 2011; Carrola et al., 2016; Greenham et al., 2019), research so far has ignored outplacement counsellors. Outplacement counsellors can be understood as a specialised group of counsellors whose clients are employees who have been made redundant (i.e., victims of a downsizing effort of organisations) and who need help to find a new job (Borgen & Butterfield, 2018). There are two different kinds of outplacement counsellors: internal and external counsellors (Kilcrease, 2013). Internal outplacement counsellors work as employees within the organisation that has made employees redundant, whereas external outplacement counsellors typically work at a specialised consulting company (Hinn, 2017). This difference between external and internal outplacement counsellors should also matter for the stress they experience. This study tests a model that explains why this should be the case.

Background and Theoretical Development

Downsizing is a common response to financial crises because organisations hope to reduce costs and maintain financial health. This hope is often unwarranted because

downsizing is on average ineffective according to the literature in the field of strategic management (Carriger, 2016). Nevertheless, downsizing is often perceived as inevitable by managers and laypeople as well (Richter & König, 2017; Sronce & McKinley, 2006). Downsizing typically means that a considerable number of employees will become unemployed, and unemployment has been empirically linked with many negative consequences, in particular detriments to their well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006).

To mitigate such negative consequences for (former) employees, downsizing organisations might offer outplacement counselling. Outplacement counsellors work with employees who have been made redundant to support them in the process of finding new employment or even a new career. Outplacement counselling often includes a phase in which clients grieve for the old job (and often experience anger for being unfairly treated), a phase in which they assess their situation (e.g., their career goals), and a phase in which they actively search for a new job (e.g., where they need help to write their resumés) (see, e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999; Borgen & Butterfield, 2018; Hinn, 2017; Kirk, 1994). Such counselling can occur in one-on-one settings or in groups (Hinn, 2017). Outplacement counselling is a growing business in North America (Borgen & Butterfield, 2018) and in Germany (Hinn, 2017), where this study was conducted, and is even compulsory in some countries under certain circumstances (e.g., in Russia, see Kaźmierczyk et al., 2020; and in Belgium, see Marzucco & Hansez, 2016).

Organisations likely pay for outplacement counselling because they believe in its effectiveness, and this belief is consistent with the academic literature on outplacement counselling (see also Liu et al., 2014). For example, Westaby (2004) collected data from a sample of former employees in the U.S and found that individuals with higher levels of outplacement support were more likely to find reemployment. Another study was conducted

by Marzucco and Hansez (2016) in Belgium. According to their results, former employees experienced higher levels of well-being the more they perceived their outplacement counselling as adequate. The availability of outplacement counselling might also make the process of firing less stressful for managers (see Richter et al., 2016) because managers then know that fired employees will receive professional support. Furthermore, organisations might also hope that outplacement counselling reduces and saves their public reputation (for additional reasons, see Alewell & Hauff, 2013, and Stacho & Stachová, 2015).

Internal vs. External Outplacement Counselling

Outplacement counsellors have a stimulating but demanding job. It is stimulating because they are regularly in fairly intense contact with new clients; it is demanding because they have to manage the different emotions of clients (e.g., anger and frustration, see also Moore et al., 2020), and they need to have a range of skills to fulfil their responsibilities toward their clients (see Kirk, 1994). In particular, clients of outplacement counsellors might be paralysed by the prospect of becoming unemployed, which makes getting through to such clients difficult, or might rage with anger about being fired, which likely hinders working constructively towards finding new employment (Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999; Hinn, 2017).

Outplacement counsellors might work internally or as external service providers. Although many organisations will likely prefer to pay external counsellors for such outplacement services, some organisations prefer internal delivery of such services – thus, internal (or in-house) outplacement counselling – to avoid having to pay the high service fees to external consulting companies (Hinn, 2017; Kilcrease, 2013). Being an internal outplacement counsellor is particularly challenging because they are counsellors *and* members of the organisation: They are employed by the same organisation that is about to make employees redundant or has already made them redundant and thus they are counsellors

as well as colleagues. This crucial difference implies different psychological processes for internal vs. external outplacement counsellors (see Figure 1).

- add Figure 1 here -

Role conflict theory (Kahn et al., 1964; Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006) can be used to predict that internal outplacement counsellors likely experience more role conflicts than external outplacement counsellors. Whereas external outplacement counsellors only have one main role (i.e., being counsellors), internal outplacement counsellors are also members of the organisation (and might even perceive themselves as representatives of the organisation). Both roles can be in conflict, for example, when clients become angry with how they were treated by the organisation, the counsellors would rather show their understanding of such anger but also feel they have to defend the decisions the organisation made. According to role conflict theory (Kahn et al., 1964; Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006), experiencing role conflicts has detrimental effects for various employee attitudes and their well-being.

Furthermore, internal outplacement counsellors might also experience more guilt for having a job than external outplacement counsellors. Internal counsellors and their clients have a shared history of employment within the same organisation, which means that they will likely perceive to share more similarities than external counsellors. Perceptions of similarity make social comparison processes more probable (Festinger, 1954). Guilt is a negative emotion associated with the recognition of a violation of one's moral standards and is commonly found among "survivors" of downsizing (Brockner et al., 1986, p. 373) because these survivors regularly wonder whether it was fair that others were laid off and they were not. Although external outplacement counsellors might also experience some guilt because their job in the consultancy is in most cases safer than their clients', internal counsellors might compare their situations more directly with their clients' and thus feel more guilt over still being employed.

These two challenges potentially lead to important consequences for both kinds of outplacement counsellors: If internal outplacement counsellors experience more role conflicts and have more feelings of guilt, this could negatively affect their well-being (i.e., emotional exhaustion, an important aspect of burnout) and also their work attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction). This is not only consistent with stress theories such as the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) but also with empirical research. In particular, role conflicts have been found to be positively correlated to burnout and negatively correlated to job satisfaction (Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006). These relationships were also observed among other groups of counsellors (e.g., Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004 [in Australia]; Thompson & Powers, 1983 [in the United States]). Similarly, feelings of guilt have been shown to be positively related with burnout (see e.g., Gil-Monte, 2012, for Spanish evidence). These arguments lead to the following two hypotheses:

H1: Internal outplacement counsellors will (a) experience more emotional exhaustion than external outplacement counsellors, and this effect will be mediated by (b) more role conflicts and (c) more guilt.

H2: Internal outplacement counsellors will (a) experience less job satisfaction than external outplacement counsellors, and this effect will be mediated by (b) more role conflicts and (c) more guilt.

Method

Sample

An invitation to an online questionnaire was distributed by contacting outplacement counsellors in Germany (relying mainly the German business network XING) and asking them to forward the link to other outplacement counsellors. This resulted in data from 98 outplacement counsellors (50 female and 45 male counsellors, with three counsellors not stating their gender). Participants were on average 51.3 years old ($SD = 8.4$, with 16

counsellors not stating their age). They had on average 9.0 years of experience in

outplacement counselling (*SD* = 5.9). Of these participants, 30 were internal outplacement

counsellors and 68 were external outplacement counsellors. It should be noted that there are

no licensure requirements in Germany for outplacement counsellors (Richter et al., 2020).

Thus, there is no standard pathway to becoming an outplacement counsellor. Ethical review

and approval were not required for this study in accordance with the local legislation and

institutional requirements.

Measures

  Role conflicts were measured with the role conflict scale developed by Rizzo et al.

(1970), following examples in the literature (e.g., Pierson-Hubeny & Archambault, 1987;

Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). This scale had already been translated to German by Wohlbold

(2002), and we adapted it to ensure that the context of all items related to outplacement

counselling. Sample items for this 8-item scale are "I have to do things as an outplacement

counsellor that should be done differently" and "As an outplacement counsellor, I receive

assignments without adequate resources and materials to execute them." Participants rated

these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 =

"strongly agree." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89 in the current sample.

  Guilt was measured using an adapted version of the 8-item survivor guilt scale that

was developed by Cummings (2015) on the basis of the interpersonal guilt questionnaire

(O'Connor et al., 1997). Small adaptions (done during the translation process) were necessary

to ensure that the items were suited to the outplacement counselling context. Sample items

were "I feel guilty about keeping my job when I think about the hardships of my clients" and

"I am uncomfortable discussing the layoff around those who survived." Again, participants

answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly

agree." One item had to be excluded to increase Cronbach's alpha from .48 to .62.

Emotional exhaustion was measured using the German version (Büssing & Perrar, 1992) of the emotional exhaustion scale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General (Schaufeli et al., 1986). It consists of five items, answered on the same 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree," and a sample item is "I feel emotionally drained from my work", and Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Job satisfaction was measured with eight items from the Neuberger and Allerbeck (1978) job satisfaction scale. Items assessed satisfaction with colleagues, one's supervisor, tasks, working conditions, the organisation, support of one's professional career, pay, and general job satisfaction by means. The Neuberger and Allerbeck (1978) scale is a widely used job satisfaction scale in Germany (see, e.g., Debus et al., 2019; Hollmann et al., 1999; Maier & Brunstein, 2001). Participants rated these items on the same 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .87 in this sample.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive information for both groups (internal vs external outplacement counsellors). It also reports the correlations for all variables of this study.

- add Table 1 here -

To test our mediation model, we used the SPSS macro PROCESS, version 3.4, developed by Hayes (2018), which can also be used for dichotomous predictors. The PROCESS macro generates bias-corrected percentile bootstrap confidence intervals for each indirect effect (using 10000 resamples), and the significance of an indirect path is indicated when the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero. Similarly, the PROCESS macro reports the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the direct effect when the mediators are included in the model (the *c'* path) and if it contains zero, this signals full mediation. Bootstrapping is recommended for mediation analyses because it does not assume a normal

sampling distribution and provides greater statistical power than other mediation approaches (Hayes, 2018).

Mediation analyses were conducted separately for each of the two dependent variables, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction (with the counselling mode being the independent variable). Table 2 reports the mediation results regarding emotional exhaustion and Table 3 regarding job satisfaction, and Figure 2 depicts these results. In particular, Figure 2(a) shows that there is a significant direct path from the mode of counselling to emotional exhaustion (i.e., the c path, which shows the regression weight when mediators are not included), and Figure 2(b) shows the same for job satisfaction as the dependent variable, which means that internal outplacement counsellors reported more emotional exhaustion and less job satisfaction than external outplacement counsellors (see also Table 1). This supports Hypotheses 1a and 2a.

- add Table 2 and Table 3 here -

Figure 2 also shows the changes if the mediators are included in the predicting equations (see also Tables 2 and 3): (a) The paths from the counselling mode to role conflicts and from role conflicts to exhaustion and job satisfaction were significant, indicating that role conflicts mediated the effects of internal vs. external counselling mode of outplacement counselling on emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. This is also consistent with the confidence intervals around the indirect effects via role mediation that included zero neither for exhaustion nor job satisfaction (see Tables 2 and 3), which also indicates mediation via role conflicts. These results support Hypotheses 1b and 2b. (b) The path from counselling mode to guilt was not significant, which means that guilt did not function as a mediator. This fits with the confidence intervals reported in Tables 2 and 3, which both included zero. This disconfirms Hypotheses 1c and 2c. (c) For both dependent variables, the direct effects (the c' paths) were not significant anymore when the mediators were added to model (see also the

confidence intervals around c' in Tables 2 and 3 that both include zero). These findings indicate full mediation for the effects of counselling mode on both dependent variables, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction.

Discussion

Although the literature on outplacement counselling describes the difference between internal and external outplacement counselling (Kilcrease, 2013), it has remained unclear what the implications of these two modes of deliveries are for the counsellors themselves. Our results show that internal outplacement counsellors are more emotionally exhausted and less satisfied with their job. Our results further explained that these effects were mediated by role conflicts, but not by feelings of guilt.

These results imply that the role of an internal outplacement counsellor is psychologically more difficult than the role of an external outplacement counsellor. Whereas the latter belong to other companies that offer a service to (former) employees of another organisation, the former are still part of the organisation that makes other employees redundant. In other words, the latter can focus on the role of the counsellor, whereas the former are still also colleagues (who might even perceive themselves as representatives of the organisation who have to defend the decisions of the organisation). The resulting role conflicts for internal outplacement counsellors then lead to negative consequences for the counsellors (i.e., reduced job satisfaction and increased emotional exhaustion), which is consistent with previous theorising and results in other professions (e.g., Kahn et al., 1964; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004).

One interesting detail is that internal outplacement counsellors were expected to report more feelings of guilt, and although this was not found, guilt was correlated with emotional exhaustion (but not job satisfaction). Given the dearth of studies on feelings of guilt among counsellors (Prikhidko & Swank, 2018), it is notable that we found a correlation between guilt

and exhaustion (.30) that was very similar to the .29 correlation that Gil-Monte (2012) reported for a Spanish sample of employees working with intellectually disabled people, which indicates the general importance of this phenomenon for helping professions.

It is also noteworthy that the outplacement counsellors' well-being seemed rather high: The means for emotional exhaustion were fairly low (1.68 for external and 2.20 for internal outplacement counsellors on a scale from 1 to 5). This can be understood as good news: The job of outplacement counsellors might be less stressful than other counselling jobs (e.g., the exhaustion mean was 2.92 on a scale from 1 to 5 when Bardhoshi et al., 2019, summarized 12 studies using the English version of the Counselor Burnout Inventory; for an exhaustion mean of 2.52 see Mullen et al., 2017). At the same time, this comparison should be treated with caution as different scales were used, and there was still considerable variance in exhaustion (i.e., although the majority of outplacement counsellors reported only modest amounts of exhaustion, some were much more stressed). Furthermore, the outplacement counsellors also seemed rather satisfied with their job (the mean being around the 4 on this scale), which is consistent with research on counsellors' job satisfaction (e.g., the job satisfaction means in Bardhoshi et al., 2019, Study 1). However, it should be mentioned that samples differ on many dimensions, and comparisons should thus be treated with caution.

More generally, this study contributes to the research on stress among counsellors (e.g., Carrola et al., 2016; Ender et al., 2019; Fye et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Mullen et al., 2017). Although counsellors' stressors and burnout have been studied across a wide range of counselling settings (Bardhoshi et al., 2019), no study so far has examined the differences in outcomes between different types of outplacement counsellors. It is important to know which stressors are common in the counselling profession, for example for developing interventions that help counsellors to cope with the stressors of their job (see also Sowa et al., 1994). What is more, burnout among counsellors has also been linked to counsellor

impairment (Carrola et al., 2016, who collected data in the southwest of the United States).

Furthermore, this study contributes to the internationalisation of counselling research.

Although the stress of being a counsellor has been studied in several countries, from the

United States (e.g., Mullen et al., 2017) and Canada (Greenham et al., 2019) to Korea (e.g.,

Yu et al., 2008), Japan (Yagi et al., 2011), and Turkey (Ender et al., 2019) – and now in

Germany (this study), the profession would likely benefit from more cross-cultural analyses,

in which, for instance, research analyse the work situation of counsellors in the same setting

(e.g., outplacement or school counselling).

In addition, understanding job stressors is also important for those who are interested

in joining the field because it gives them access to realistic information. Such information

should help developing expectations about the job that can later be met and thus decrease

turnover and increase job satisfaction (Premack & Wanous, 1985).

Limitations and future research

As all studies, this study is not free of limitations, and two seem particularly

noteworthy. First, the scale that was used to assess guilt (Cummings, 2015) was not as reliable

as expected, and future research should try to improve it, in particular because guilt among

counsellors remains a largely neglected area of research (Prikhidko & Swank, 2018). Second,

in this study we used the emotional exhaustion scale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-

General, a general scale to measure emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli et al., 1986), and future

research may instead want to use the Counselor Burnout Inventory (Bardhoshi et al., 2019;

Lee et al., 2007), a scale that was developed to specifically assess exhaustion among

counsellors by using. However, as there has not been any German version of the Counselor

Burnout Inventory available, this study relied on the already established German translation of

the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General scale (Büssing & Perrar, 1992) instead. A replication

of this study in an English-speaking country would circumvent this potential limitation.

In the future, researchers could study the career paths of outplacement counsellors. In particular, it would be interesting to explore the career trajectories of internal outplacement counsellors. From our sample, we heard anecdotes that some were given the choice between either being made redundant or becoming outplacement counsellors, but research in this area is missing. Furthermore, researchers could study the effectiveness of internal outplacement counselling and its boundary conditions. Such research may be able to relate counsellors' job satisfaction and exhaustion to the effectiveness of their counselling (Salyers et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to better understand the psychological differences between internal vs. external outplacement counsellors. The study shows that being an internal outplacement counsellor is a particularly demanding job because internal outplacement counsellors reported more emotional exhaustion and less satisfaction with their job, which in turn was explained by their experience of more role conflicts. Given the importance of the work outplacement counsellors do for those who were made redundant, future research should search for ways that make their jobs less stressful and more satisfying.

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Table 1

Intercorrelations of Variables and Means and Standard Deviations for Internal and External Outplacement Counsellors

Variables	M_{int}	SD_{int}	M_{ext}	SD_{ext}	1	2	3	4	5
1. Internal vs. external counselling	-	-	-	-	-				
2. Role conflicts	2.60	0.68	1.64	0.57	.60**	.89			
3. Guilt	1.62	0.34	1.50	0.42	.14	.23*	.62		
4. Job satisfaction	3.78	0.63	4.11	0.72	-.21*	-.50**	-.16	.87	
5. Emotional exhaustion	2.20	0.68	1.68	0.66	.34**	.40**	.30**	-.27**	.87

Note. int = internal outplacement counsellors, ext = external outplacement counsellors. Internal counselling coded as 1, external as 0. Cronbach's alpha in the diagonal in italics. Participants rated all measures on a Likert scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

*p < .05, two-tailed; **p < .01, two-tailed.

Table 2

Regression Results for the Mediation of Role Conflicts and Guilt on the Relationship between Internal vs. External Counselling and Emotional Exhaustion

Model	R^2	Coefficient	*SE*	*p*	95% CI
Effects of the independent variable on mediators (repeated from Table 2)					
Internal vs. external counselling → Role conflicts	.36	0.96	0.14	< .01	[0.68, 1.25]
Internal vs. external counselling → Guilt	.02	0.12	0.08	.13	[-0.04, 0.29]
Effects of the independent variable and the mediators on the dependent variable	.22			< .01	
Internal vs. external counselling → Emotional exhaustion (i.e., direct effect *c'*)		0.24	0.20	.24	[-0.16, 0.63]
Role conflicts → Emotional exhaustion		0.25	0.12	< .05	[0.01, 0.49]
Guilt → Emotional exhaustion		0.38	0.18	< .05	[0.03, 0.73]
Indirect effects					
Total indirect effect		0.29	0.12	-	[0.06, 0.53]
Indirect effect via role conflicts		0.24	0.11	-	[0.03, 0.48]
Indirect effect via guilt		0.04	0.04	-	[-0.02, 0.12]

Note. CI = bias-corrected confidence interval. Coefficients are unstandardised. Internal counselling coded as 1, external as 0.

$n_{\text{internal counsellors}} = 30$, $n_{\text{external counsellors}} = 68$.

Table 3

Regression Results for the Mediation of Role Conflicts and Guilt on the Relationship between Internal vs. External Counselling and Job Satisfaction

Model	R^2	Coefficient	*SE*	*p*	95% CI
Effects of the independent variable on mediators					
Internal vs. external counselling → Role conflicts	.36	0.96	0.14	< .01	[0.68, 1.25]
Internal vs. external counselling → Guilt	.02	0.12	0.08	.13	[-0.04, 0.29]
Effects of the independent variable and the mediators on the dependent variable	.26			< .01	
Internal vs. external counselling → Job satisfaction (i.e., direct effect *c'*)		0.19	0.16	.23	[-0.12, 0.51]
Role conflicts → Job satisfaction		-0.53	0.11	< .01	[-0.74, -0.31]
Guilt → Job satisfaction		-0.08	0.12	.52	[-0.33, 0.17]
Indirect effects					
Total indirect effect		-0.52	0.13	-	[-0.79, -0.29]
Indirect effect via role conflicts		-0.51	0.13	-	[-0.78, -0.28]
Indirect effect via guilt		-0.01	0.02	-	[-0.06, 0.03]

Note. CI = bias-corrected confidence interval. Coefficients are unstandardised. Internal counselling coded as 1, external as 0.

$n_{\text{internal counsellors}} = 30$, $n_{\text{external counsellors}} = 68$.
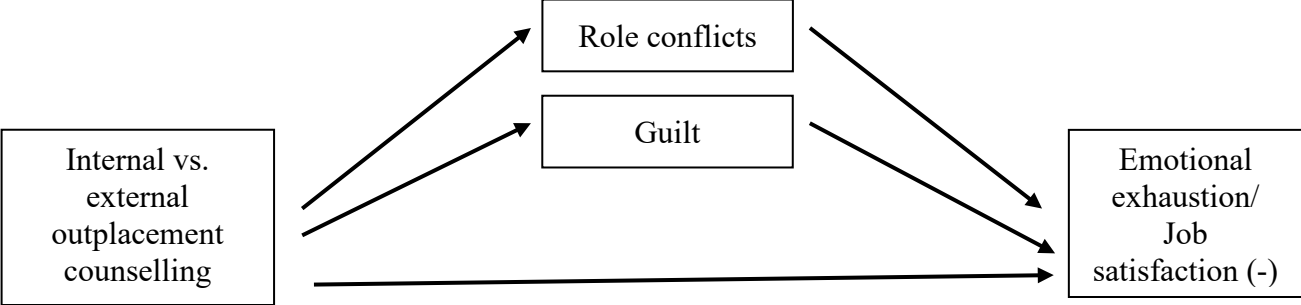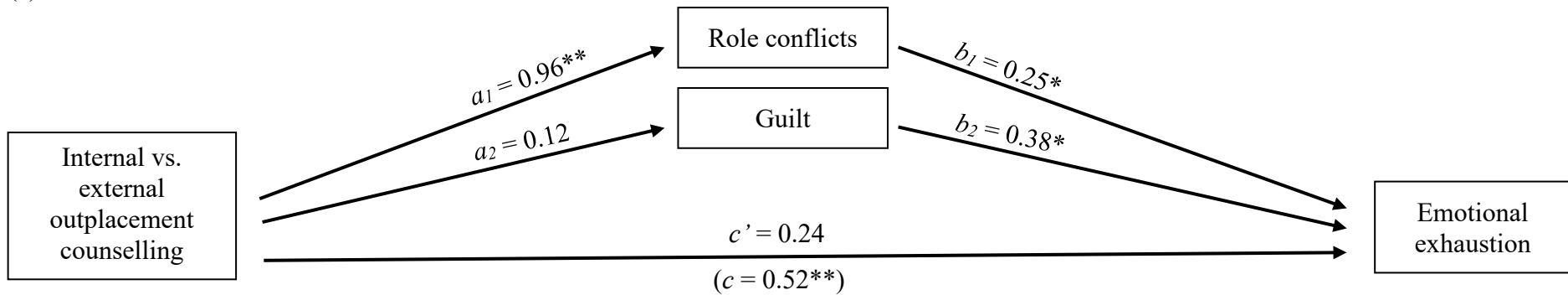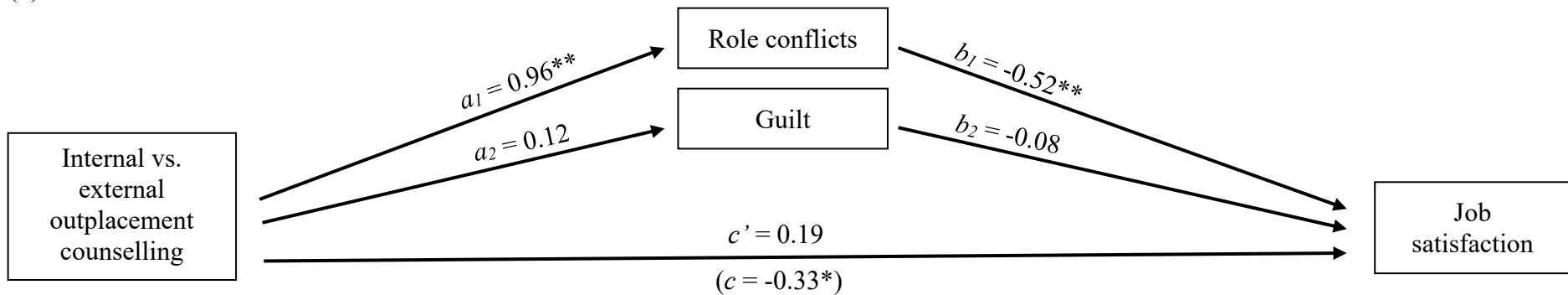
Figure 1

Theoretical Model

Figure 2

Mediation of the Relationship between Internal vs. External Outplacement Counselling on (a) Emotional Exhaustion and (b) Job Satisfaction

(a)

(b)

Note. Coefficients are unstandardised. Internal counselling coded as 1, external as 0. $n_{internal\ counsellors} = 30$, $n_{external\ counsellors} = 68$. Full medication is indicated by the drop from a significant c path (which shows the regression weight when mediating variables are not included) to a nonsignificant c' path (which shows the regression weight when mediating variables are included).
*p < .05, two-tailed; **p < .01, two-tailed.