A drug called comparison
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CHAPTER 4

*I am not a better teacher, but others are doing worse: Burnout and perceptions of superiority among teachers*

Abstract - This study examined differences between teachers high and low in burnout in the perception of being superior to others. Because burnout implies a decline in well-being, and because well-being is related to perceived superiority, it was hypothesized that perceived superiority would be reduced among individuals high in burnout. This would be particularly true for superiority with respect to positive behaviors (feeling better than others). As negative behaviors of others are generally highly salient, it was expected that even individuals high in burnout would be able to maintain a sense of negative superiority (feeling less bad than others). 120 teachers in secondary education were asked to generate information about inferior and superior others. Perceived superiority was assessed by response latencies and the quality of the information generated. As expected, only positive superiority was reduced among teachers high in burnout. Thus, they felt less good, but also less bad than others. Consequences for classroom performance and suggestions for the treatment of burnout are discussed.

In European countries as well as in many other countries of the world, teacher burnout is a well-known phenomenon. In the media, magazines and on television, teacher burnout receives a considerable amount of attention. In the Netherlands, mental-health problems appear in 36% of the cases as the reason for allocating a disability pension to a work-incapacitated teacher (USZO, 1998). Research in Europe suggests that 60% to 70% of the teachers are under frequent stress and that approximately 30% of the teachers show signs of burnout (see Rudow, 1999). Moreover, also in comparison with various other kinds of ‘people work’, such as mental and physical health professions, teachers appear to be at a high risk of burnout. Teachers report more burnout symptoms than workers in other social professions (de Heus & Diekstra, 1999).

Teacher burnout refers, as burnout in other professions, to a decline in well-being that is caused by chronic stress in the work situation and is generally considered as a multidimensional syndrome (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The first, most central dimension is emotional exhaustion (Shirom, 1989). One experiences a depletion of emotional resources and feels

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‘empty’ or ‘worn out’. The second aspect of burnout is depersonalization. This refers to a negative, cynical attitude toward one’s students. The third aspect of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment. Individuals in a state of burnout evaluate their accomplishments at work negatively.

Emotional exhaustion is found relatively often among young teachers (see Byrne, 1999), as well as depersonalization among men, the latter finding having been ascribed to differing traditional role patterns among men and women (e.g., Greenglass, Burke, & Konarski, 1998; Van Horn, Schaufeli, Greenglass, & Burke, 1997; VanYperen, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1992). In general, burnout is more prevalent among secondary school teachers than among elementary school teachers (Russell, Altmayer, & Van Velzen, 1987; Van Horn et al., 1997).

Problems associated with teacher burnout include excess time pressure, poor relationships with colleagues, large classes, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, role ambiguity, poor opportunities for promotion, lack of support, lack of participation in decision-making, and behavioral problems of pupils (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Boyle, Borg, Falzon, and Baglioni (1995) identified four factors as sources of teacher stress: pupil misbehavior (e.g., noisy and impolite pupils), time and resource difficulties (e.g., time pressure and lack of facilities), recognition needs (e.g., limited opportunities for promotion), and poor relationships (e.g., with colleagues and pupils’ parents). According to Dworkin (1997), organizational and structural stressors also induce teacher burnout, which he illustrates with Texas school reform programs in the 1980s that almost doubled the percentage of burnt-out teachers in this state. During this school reform, standardized norms for teachers and students were created, and teachers’ competence was questioned and tested, thereby diminishing the teachers’ job control. A high level of control over one’s fate or performance is essential for successful functioning. Especially when accompanied by high demands, low job control results in distress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). In the same way, Friedman (1991) described how burnout is fostered by school cultures in which the school administration enforces clearly defined, narrow, measurable goals underlining academic achievement on the teachers. Less organized schools with ‘softer’ goals seem to give teachers more opportunity for experimenting with new learning methods, for discussing problems they encounter, and for having supportive contact with the school administration.
Apart from work-related factors, several individual and interpersonal factors influencing burnout have been proposed. An individual characteristic that may protect an individual against burnout is, for instance, communal orientation, which refers to a concern for other people (VanYperen et al., 1992). Nurses who care for their patients out of concern for them, tend to experience less burnout. Personality traits that seem to predispose individuals to develop burnout are, for example, shyness, introversion, and aggrieveness (Wagenvoort, VanYperen, Hoogduin, & Schaap, 1998). An example of an interpersonal factor influencing burnout is inequity in the relationship with the recipients of one’s care (VanYperen et al., 1992; Schaufeli, Van Dierendonck, & Van Gorp, 1996). More specific, human service professionals who feel that they invest more in relationships with recipients than they receive in return, report more burnout symptoms (Schaufeli, et al., 1996; VanYperen et al. 1992; VanYperen, 1996).

With regard to the consequences of burnout, one may assume that burnt-out teachers perform less well as a teacher (Rudow, 1999; Abel & Sewell, 1999). The performance of high-achieving students improves considerably less when their teacher is burnt out (see Dworkin, 1997). For instance, emotional exhaustion may lead to a reduction in tolerance, and teachers in a state of burnout may consequently be more inclined to lose their temper with difficult pupils. Furthermore, because of their negative mood state and their lack of commitment, their ability to motivate pupils may be affected. What is more, their emotional exhaustion may result in cognitive shortcomings, which may eventuate in mistakes. In addition, teachers in a state of burnout have higher sickness and absence rates (Rudow 1999; Burke & Greenglass, 1995) which not only poses a financial burden to society but may also be harmful for pupils (and obviously for teachers themselves).

Because of the detrimental consequences of teacher burnout, it is indispensable to develop programs aimed at the prevention and treatment of burnout. To develop such programs, it is necessary to know more about the cognitive and motivational aspects of the burnout syndrome. The present study examines if and how the perception of being superior to others is impaired among teachers experiencing burnout. In other words, this study focuses on the question of whether teachers in state of burnout have a reduced sense of superiority toward other teachers.
In general, individuals tend to experience a sense of superiority vis-à-vis most others (for a review see Hoorens, 1993). With regard to personality traits, for example, people consider themselves as brighter, more responsible and more interesting than others. They also think that they are less phony, less cruel, and less snobbish than others (Brown, 1986). As for intimate relationships, individuals generally assume that their marriage is better than that of most others (Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997; Buunk & VanYperen, 1991). Furthermore, it has been found that at least 40% of professionals in diverse jobs perceive their performance as one of the best (in the top 10%) as compared to professionals with similar jobs. This percentage is even higher for jobs at high levels, where sometimes more than 80% consider themselves as belonging to the top 10% (Meyer, 1980). Because it is not possible for most people to be better than average, except in extremely skewed distributions, this sense of superiority is generally considered to be a cognitive bias, or as some authors have suggested, an illusion (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

When studying the phenomenon of perceived superiority, it is important to distinguish between positive superiority (feeling better than others) and negative superiority (feeling less bad than others). Van Lange and Breukelaar (1992) assessed the relative strength of positive and negative superiority by asking people to list behaviors that others show more often, just as often and less often. Dependent on the condition to which individuals were assigned, they had to generate positive or negative behaviors. Van Lange and Breukelaar found that people primarily experienced negative superiority; individuals could cite more examples of negative behaviors for others than for themselves. In contrast, people experienced in general little positive superiority: They were hardly able to generate more positive behaviors of themselves than of others. Van Lange and Breukelaar attributed the strength of negative superiority to the relatively high salience of negative behavior.

Indeed, negative information has more influence on the evaluation of others than positive information (Martijn, Spears, Van der Pligt, & Jakobs, 1992). Negative behavior generally receives a large amount of attention, especially when performed by others (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Selective attention and weighting of information determine the availability of information in memory, which can influence judgments about self and others (Alicke, 1985; Weinstein, 1980). In addition, according to Headey and Wearing (1988) individuals may focus on subroles in which they feel
good and subsequently weigh this subrole heavily when making judgments about self and others. These authors have also suggested that people may exclude more advantaged individuals from their reference group. Moreover, individuals may compare themselves on rather vague and objectively unverifiable dimensions, such as morality and commitment, on which positive beliefs about oneself are relatively easy to maintain (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; VanYperen, 1992).

Positive illusions of the self might be functional as they appear to be related to well-being (Headey & Wearing, 1988). Taylor and Brown (1988, 1994) have reviewed the literature on the relationship between well-being and three positive illusions: the illusion of superiority, the illusion of control (i.e., an unrealistic positive belief about personal control over environmental events), and unrealistic optimism (i.e., an unrealistic positive view of the future). They have examined three aspects of mental health: happiness or contentment, the ability to care for others, and the capacity for creative, productive work. They conclude that there is evidence that positive illusions are linked to all three aspects of mental health (cf. Block & Colvin, 1994; Colvin & Block, 1994). For example, compared with people who are unhappy, happy people think more highly of themselves on dimensions reflecting attractiveness and rank (Allan & Gilbert, 1995; Buunk & Brenninkmeijer, 1999) and they display more unrealistic optimism (Alloy & Ahrens, 1987). As for the relationship with the capacity to care for other people, positive illusions seem to be linked directly and indirectly to the development and maintenance of bonding with other people. By evoking a positive mood in people, positive illusions may influence the ability to care for others. Individuals in whom a positive mood is induced are more helpful towards others (e.g., Forgas, 1998). Finally, by improving intellectual functioning and by increasing motivation, positive illusions seem to enhance the capacity for creative and productive work.

Assuming that a sense of superiority diminishes with reduced well-being and that burnout is accompanied by a decline in well-being, it is expected that teachers who feel burnt out experience less superiority as compared to teachers who do not feel burnt out (Hypothesis 1). Following Van Lange and Breukelaar (1992), we make a distinction between negative superiority (feeling less bad than others) and positive superiority (feeling better than others), and, therefore, between negatively and positively valenced behaviors. Because negative behavior is generally more salient than positive behavior, we expect that negative superiority is less affected
among teachers high in burnout than positive superiority (*Hypothesis 2*). In other words, negative superiority is expected to be more robust than positive superiority.

In this study, we asked teachers to generate information about inferior teachers (i.e., downward comparison) and about superior teachers (i.e., upward comparison). More specifically, we asked teachers to list either positive or negative behaviors that other teachers perform more and less often. We measured response latencies to assess the cognitive accessibility of upward- and downward-comparison information, because response latencies are relatively unobtrusive and are recognized as indicators of the cognitive accessibility of information (Fazio, 1990). We then computed an index of perceived superiority based on the cognitive accessibility, to which we will refer as ‘latency superiority’. We assume that a person feels inferior if that particular person has a higher cognitive accessibility for upward-than for downward-comparison information. Hence, it is hypothesized that for teachers low in burnout, information about inferior others (i.e., downward comparison information) is cognitively more accessible than information about superior others (i.e., upward comparison information)\(^5\). For teachers high in burnout, we expect this pattern to be less pronounced or even reversed, especially when positive behaviors are generated.

In addition to response latencies, we also used the quality of the behaviors generated as a measure of superiority, which we will refer to as ‘quality superiority’. Quality was operationalized as the product of the relevance and the diversity of the behaviors. The index implies that quality is low when someone generates aspects that have low relevance and little diversity (e.g., wiping off the black board and keeping the door open during class). Quality is high when a person comes up with very relevant and diverse aspects (e.g., showing respect for pupils and preparing lessons conscientiously). We assume that for teachers low in burnout the quality of downward-comparison behaviors is higher than the quality of upward-comparison behaviors. For teachers high in burnout, this tendency is

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\(^5\) To measure superiority, Van Lange and Breukelaar (1992) and Van Lange and Rusbult (1995) assessed the cognitive accessibility of upward and downward comparison information by counting the behaviors people generated. This ‘counting’ measure might be somewhat distorted because people sometimes generate highly similar behaviors. They may say for example that other people are kinder, friendlier and more sympathetic. They may also generate behaviors with low relevance. Therefore this study measures, among other things, the quality of the behaviors generated.
expected to be less strong, in particular when positive behaviors are generated.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

A total of 120 teachers (72 male and 48 female) working in secondary schools were recruited. Burnout is prevalent in this profession (see Schaufeli, Daamen, & Van Mierlo, 1994). The mean age was 44.12 \((SD = 9.74)\). The experiment was carried out in schools, where teachers were asked to fill out a number of questions on a laptop computer. Participants were individually tested in a small and quiet room and they were told that the experiment was about their self-image and how they experienced their job. Three teachers had misunderstood the instruction and their answers were therefore excluded from statistical analysis.

The experiment used a \(2 \times 2 \times 2\) design, with valence (positive vs. negative) and burnout (high vs. low) as between-subjects variables and type of comparison (upward vs. downward) as a within-subjects variable. The experimental manipulations were based on research by Van Lange and Breukelaar (1992) and Van Lange and Rusbult (1995). We asked participants to think about behaviors of other teachers in a similar working situation. Those in the positive condition listed as many positively valenced behaviors as possible; those in the negative condition listed as many negatively valenced behaviors as possible. Upward comparison was induced by asking participants to generate positive behaviors that other teachers show more often, or to generate negative behaviors that other teachers show less often, respectively; downward comparison was induced by asking participants to generate positive behaviors that other teachers show less often, or negative behaviors that other teachers show more often, respectively\(^6\). No time limit was mentioned for the task. We randomly determined the order of the comparison manipulations.

**Measures**

**Burnout.** Burnout was assessed with a Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI-NL-Le, Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995).

\(^6\) Lateral comparison was induced by asking participants to generate positive or negative behaviors that other teachers show just as often. For reasons of clarity, the data concerning lateral comparison are excluded from the results section.
The norm group was a sample of 916 teachers in secondary general and vocational education (Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995). This scale contains three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment (see also Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Cronbach’s alphas representing the internal consistency of the subscales were .89 (exhaustion), .67 (depersonalization), and .81 (personal accomplishment). Teachers were considered as high in burnout if they scored not only high (75th percentile or higher) on emotional exhaustion, but also high (75th percentile or higher) on depersonalization or low (25th percentile or lower) on personal accomplishment. This criterion (‘Exhaustion + 1’), which resulted in a burnout percentage of 23.3%, was developed in a study by Brenninkmeijer and VanYperen (1999). To investigate how burnout could be most accurately assessed by means of a burnout inventory, Brenninkmeijer and VanYperen compared the scores on the burnout inventory of 44 well functioning individuals with the scores of 29 individuals diagnosed as experiencing burnout by clinicians. Individuals were diagnosed as being burnt out when they met the conditions for the diagnosis neurasthenia according to the ICD-10 classification (Internal Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization, WHO, 1992) and when the syndrome resulted from chronic stress. When the complaints were related to work and professionalism, this was considered as extra support for the diagnosis burnout. Scores on the burnout inventory were not used for this diagnosis. The ‘Exhaustion + 1’ criterion resulted in a burnout percentage of 6.8% in the well functioning group, and a percentage of 69.0% in the group diagnosed as burnt-out. Thus, the chance that a well functioning person would be diagnosed as burnt-out was well around 5%, which is a conventional percentage for a Type-1 error.

Perceived superiority. Perceived superiority was assessed with quantitative and qualitative measures referred to as latency superiority and quality superiority, respectively. The correlation between these two measures was .40 ($p < .001$). Latency superiority was determined by response latencies for upward- and downward-comparison information. The time to generate and to type in the first behavior was measured for downward and upward comparison. For each experimental manipulation, individuals who could not generate any behavior were given a score of four times the maximum score, analyses generated similar results.

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7 When individuals who could not generate any behavior were given a score of four times the maximum score, analyses generated similar results.
twice the maximum score*. A total of 34.2% of the participants had this score for upward comparison, while for downward comparison this percentage was 16.2%. We then logarithmically transformed the variables to increase the accuracy of the mean as an indication for central tendency (Fazio, 1990). By subtracting the response latency for downward comparison from the response latency for upward comparison, we obtained an indication for superiority. For example, a person who generated upward-comparison information in 50 seconds and downward-comparison information in 25 seconds had transformed response latencies of ln 50 = 3.91 and ln 25 = 3.22, respectively, resulting in a latency superiority score of 3.91 - 3.22 = 0.69.

Quality superiority was determined by the quality of upward- and downward-comparison information. The behaviors generated by the participants were qualitatively analyzed by two independent raters. They rated the diversity of the behaviors for downward and upward comparison separately. Furthermore, they judged how relevant each behavior was for the profession of a teacher. Both ratings were done on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all relevant/not at all diverse) to 5 (very relevant/very diverse). Inter-rater reliability was .74 for relevance and .90 for diversity. Relevance and diversity were multiplied to obtain a measure for the quality of the behaviors generated. The mean relevance was not considered as a good single indicator for the quality of the behaviors because a person who generates one very relevant and one medium relevant behavior would score lower than a person who generates only one very relevant behavior. Similarly, we did not consider diversity to be a valid single indicator of the quality of the behaviors because individuals may generate highly dissimilar behaviors that have low relevance. Quality superiority was computed by subtracting the quality of upward-comparison behaviors from the quality of downward-comparison behaviors.

**Results**

*Latency superiority. A 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (burnout: low vs. high) univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on latency superiority. As superiority scores were affected by the number of characters participants typed, we used the difference in number of characters for the first behaviors (downward - upward) as a covariate in the
analyses. No main effect of burnout on latency superiority appeared ($F(1,112) = 0.95, ns$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, we found a significant effect of valence on latency superiority ($F(1,112) = 5.25, p < .05$). Consistent with Van Lange and Breukelaar (1992), the adjusted condition means indicated that superiority was higher for negative behavior as compared with positive behavior ($M_{\text{neg}} = 0.60$ vs. $M_{\text{pos}} = -.04$). This means that participants found themselves primarily less bad rather than better than others. Furthermore, this effect was qualified by an interaction effect between burnout and valence ($F(1,112) = 10.42, p < .01$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. Post hoc analyses revealed that latency superiority was lower among individuals high in burnout who generated positive behaviors of other teachers (see Figure 1). Superiority in this group differed significantly from superiority in the other three groups ($ps < .05$). In fact, only one group appeared to feel inferior, namely individuals high in burnout who generated positive behavior.

![Figure 1](image-url)  
*Figure 1.* Latency superiority as a function of burnout and valence of behavior.
Quality superiority. A 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (burnout: low vs. high) univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also performed on quality superiority. In line with Hypothesis 1, we found a significant main effect of burnout on quality superiority \((F(1,113) = 4.53, p < .05)\). Superiority was lower for people high as compared to low in burnout \((M_{\text{high}} = 1.75 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{low}} = 4.28)\). This analysis did not yield a main effect of valence \((F(1,113) = 1.56, \text{ns})\), but in line with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant interaction between burnout and valence \((F(1,113) = 4.13, p < .05)\). A post hoc analysis revealed a similar pattern as on latency superiority: Quality superiority was lower among individuals high in burnout who generated positive behavior (see Figure 2). This group differed from individuals low in burnout who generated positive behavior and from individuals high in burnout who generated negative behavior (ranges Duncan, \(p < .05\)).

To find out which of the three dimensions of burnout -- emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, or personal accomplishment -- could account for the results, univariate analyses of variance were performed with the separate dimensions of burnout and valence of behaviors as independent variables and with latency superiority and quality superiority as dependent variables. These analyses revealed an interaction effect between emotional exhaustion and valence \((F(1,112) = 8.50, p < .01)\) and an interaction between personal accomplishment and valence \((F(1,112) = 4.57, p < .05)\) on latency superiority. The interaction between personal accomplishment and valence on quality superiority was also significant \((F(1,113) = 4.69, p < .05)\). These patterns highly resembled the pattern found in the analyses with burnout as a factor. In addition, main effects of competence were found on latency superiority \((F(1,112) = 7.55, p < .01)\) and quality superiority, although the last effect was only marginally significant \((F(1,113) = 3.13, p < .10)\). On both measures, superiority was reduced among individuals low in personal accomplishment. No main or interaction effects were found with depersonalization as an independent variable.

To gain further insight in the interaction between valence and burnout on latency superiority, 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (burnout: low vs. high) univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on the response latencies for downward- and upward-comparison behavior. In these analyses, only a marginally significant effect of burnout on the response latency for downward-comparison behavior appeared \((F(1,113) = 2.84, p < .10)\). Individuals high in burnout showed larger response latencies for downward-comparison behavior than individuals low in burnout. Thus, downward-comparison behavior was cognitively somewhat less accessible among individuals high in burnout. To clarify the interaction between valence and burnout on quality superiority, identical analyses were done on the quality of downward- and upward-comparison behavior. These analyses did not yield any significant results.
Discussion

This study examined differences between teachers high and low in burnout in the perception of being superior to others. Teachers were asked to generate either positive or negative behaviors that other teachers performed more and less often. The general pattern observed was that among teachers high in burnout, positive superiority (i.e., feeling better than others) was reduced, whereas negative superiority (i.e., feeling less bad than others) was unaffected. This suggests that teachers high in burnout felt less good and, paradoxically, less bad than other teachers. This pattern emerged on both measures of superiority (latency and quality superiority) and suggests that negative superiority is quite robust, and even so robust that individuals in a state of burnout are able to maintain it.

The lack of positive superiority among individuals in a state of burnout is congruent with earlier research indicating that a decline of superiority was related to symptoms of burnout, such as reduced personal accomplishment, although in that research it was not related to the core
element of burnout, emotional exhaustion (Breninkmeijer, VanYperen, & Buunk, 2001a). However, there is an alternative explanation for our finding that individuals in a state of burnout displayed stronger cognitive accessibility for upward, rather than downward, comparison with respect to positive behaviors. Burnt-out individuals may experience a strong need to improve themselves and may, therefore, keep their mind on positive behaviors that other teachers perform more often than they do. For instance, teachers might actually improve their dealing with difficult pupils by focusing on the behaviors and strategies other colleagues use to maintain their temper. Nevertheless, a strong need to self-improve among burnt-out individuals may well be caused or accompanied by a decline in superiority and the two explanations are therefore not mutually exclusive.

The robustness of negative superiority may be considered as a mechanism aimed to maintain or restore self-esteem. By focusing on negative behaviors of colleagues, and by trying to ignore negative behaviors of oneself, individuals may try to preserve a sense of satisfaction about themselves, even when their own achievements leave a lot to be desired. A focus on other people’s negative behaviors may be relatively easy to achieve as these behaviors are generally highly salient (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Perhaps this selective focus could therefore be a useful tool in the treatment of burnout. A popular ingredient in the treatment of burnout is the cognitive-behavioral technique of challenging dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., Malkinson, Kushnir, & Weisberg, 1997). The belief ‘I must be a perfect teacher’, for instance, is an irrational belief that may lead to distress. By asking oneself questions such as ‘Why is it so important to be perfect?’, ‘Is this belief true?’, and ‘Is this belief helpful to me?’ the dysfunctional belief may be tackled. Actively challenging a belief however, may require some effort, and it might be easier to let individuals just shift their focus of attention: Burnt-out individuals who are dissatisfied with their own performance may be stimulated to focus on negative behaviors of others. Instead of reflecting on their own positive qualities, they might rather think of other people’s negative qualities. In addition, they may concentrate especially on comparison information on vague or ambiguous, and hence easily distortable, dimensions (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; VanYperen, 1992). In this way, individuals in a state of burnout may realize that their own performance is not so bad after all.

This study raises an interesting question concerning the causal relationship between burnout and the perception that one is functioning less
well than others. It may be that feelings of positive inferiority cause burnout. For example, it is possible that people try to reduce their feeling of inferiority by working harder thereby increasing the risk on burnout. This reasoning is similar to the view of Fischer (1983) who considers burnout as a narcissistic disorder. According to Fischer, burnout candidates choose to work harder when they are disappointed in their job. With this, they try to maintain the illusion that they are special and better than others. Another possibility is that feelings of burnout, which comprise feelings of reduced personal accomplishment, lead to perceptions of functioning less well than others. Most likely, however, is that burnout and positive inferiority reinforce each other in a circular relationship (e.g., Friedman & Farber, 1992).

It can be speculated that a decline of perceived superiority among teachers negatively affects individual performances of pupils. First, teachers with a reduced sense of superiority may distance themselves from their work and their pupils to cope with their feelings of inferiority. By reducing the importance of their work, being outperformed by colleagues may be less painful for these teachers (e.g., Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991), but obviously pupils may be harmed by their cynicism and lack of concern. Second, pupils may sense that a teacher feels inferior and insecure (e.g., via body posture or eye contact) and, as a result, may find this teacher less confident and less convincing. Third, feelings of inferiority may cause worries about loss of job control. Thus, dealing with difficult colleagues or with the school administration may be particularly hard for teachers who feel inferior. As emphasized by Karasek and Theorell (1990), low levels of job control in combination with high demands are likely to lead to distress and a deterioration of job performance.

It should be noted that West-European countries, including the Netherlands, are characterized by relatively low levels of competitiveness (Van der Vliert, 1998), and that Dutch people report less individualism as compared to, for instance, Americans (Hofstede, 1980). Hence, winning seems to be more important in the individualistic countries, and a lack of relative superiority may affect individuals’ well-being and job performance in these countries even more than in the Netherlands. In fact, it has been proposed that the value placed upon individual achievement in the US may be responsible for the higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization found in U.S. samples (Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1995).
In a nutshell, this research indicates that teacher burnout is accompanied by a lack of perceived superiority with respect to positive behaviors, which may have detrimental consequences for both teachers’ and pupils’ well-being and performance. However, teachers in a state of burnout do feel superior on negative behaviors, and this may reflect a strategy to maintain or repair a sense of superiority. Hence, when feeling burnt out, teachers may utilize their colleagues’ flaws and failures to boost their self-esteem and, possibly, to prevent a decline in their performance as a teacher.