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# Dropping Out of School as a Stress Process: Heterogeneous Profiles in the Form of Boredom and Burnout

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**Abstract**— This theoretical article proposes a model of dropping out based on a stress process that explains the heterogeneity of dropout profiles. A first section presents the theory of individual stress. A second section builds a model of stress-dropout that is structured around the constraints of student's psychological needs and school demands. In a third section, it is shown that this model explains various dropout profiles that are linked to school boredom and burnout. A final section proposes that justice beliefs underlie the stress-dropout process and that they determine in part its heterogeneity.

**Keywords**— School dropout, Stress process, Heterogeneity, Boredom, Burnout, Justice beliefs

## Introduction

Dropping out of school, or leaving school without a qualifying diploma, has been a social problem for thirty years because of the work and social difficulties encountered by non-graduate individuals, notably in contexts of contracting labour markets and educational upgrading following school massification (Rumberger, 1987; Zaffran, 2015). This phenomenon has had deleterious effects both for non-graduates (loss of health and income on life) and for the community (tax costs, crime; Brunello & De Paola, 2014). Addressing this social problem is thus a priority on the political agenda in France and Europe, where the emphasis is on tackling “early school leaving” among young people aged 18 to 24 years, who have at most a middle school diploma and who are not pursuing academic or vocational training (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014).

The European target set for 2020 is to reduce the rate of early school leavers to 10%. The Eurydice report shows that many European countries are on track to meet this target, with

some even achieving lower rates of around 5%, and France stabilizing at a rate of around 10% since 2002 (MENESR-DEPP, 2015). These changes are due to a variety of policies concerning the development of childcare and educational services (particularly in underprivileged neighborhoods), the reorganization of educational tracks (more flexibility and permeability) and the improvement of career and vocational guidance. This last measure is highlighted as an important lever of action against dropping out.

One theme is missing from Eurydice's report and its review of the international literature, namely the heterogeneity of school dropout profiles. This absence is important because the effectiveness of intervention programs to combat school dropout depends on their ability to identify and target specific situations of school ruptures methodically. For example, some authors in the United States have pointed out that interventions which are applied uniformly have a limited impact, because they remedy some dropout situations but exacerbate others (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Conversely, other authors have criticized interventions based on individual tailoring that do not follow systematic methods (i.e., lack of standardization), because their effectiveness is uneven depending on the local actors and the institutions that set them up (Wilson et al., 2011).

The absence of the theme of heterogeneity in the Eurydice report can be explained by the fact that the theorization of school dropout profiles is still tentative (Bowers & Sprott, 2012) and is only rarely integrated into explanatory models (e.g., Finn, 1989). However, the diversity of dropout profiles is clearly apparent across studies. These show that profiles differ in terms of personal well-being, academic results, attitudes, and behaviors (Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Fortin et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2000); that these differences develop gradually over time (Archambault et al., 2009; Duchesne et al., 2008; Muthén & Asparouhov, 2011; Schoeneberger, 2012); and that dropping out is neither specific to vocational tracks nor to working-class backgrounds (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Bernard & Michaut, 2014, 2016; Blaya & Hayden, 2003; Dardier et al., 2013). In addition, this heterogeneity seems to revolve around two paradigmatic dropout profiles with, on the one hand, students who internalize their school difficulties and who continue to invest in their student tasks despite their distress; and, on the other hand, students who express their ruptures from school by showing contempt and disinterest for school, in the form of counter-normative attitudes and behaviors.

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The working hypothesis in this article is that these two internalizing and externalizing tendencies in dropout profiles denote situations of burnout and boredom, that is, two negative emotional states of stress. The recent publication in a major international journal of school dropout model based on the stress process is, in this sense, much welcome (Dupéré et al., 2015). These authors propose to explain dropping out as a double process combining early stressors at the start of schooling that build up into a “life course” process making the pupil more vulnerable to dropping out (e.g., precarious family or community environment, conflicts with teachers, academic or social difficulties), and late stressors that catalyze school leaving via a final “stress process” (e.g., school transition, school bullying, early parenthood, incarceration or loss of employment of a significant other). These early and late stressors are thought to cause dropping out by gradually eroding school engagement and performance. In addition, their model assumes that stress-dropout processes are moderated by students’ personal and social resources that counteract the situation of dropping out, or that make it more or less pregnant over time.

The model proposed by Dupéré and colleagues shows the importance of environmental constraints in the emergence of school dropout behavior, by focusing on the “concrete” dimension of stress processes. In order to complete this perspective, this article aims to elucidate their “abstract” or subjective dimension by considering emotional states associated with stress processes, building on the transactional theory of stress and emotions of Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The goal is to build a stress-dropout model based on emotions and to show its heuristic value for explaining the emergence of distinct school dropout profiles.

This research is organized as follows. The first section presents the theory of individual stress in its concrete and abstract perspectives, in order to show their complementarity and to establish conceptual foundations. On this basis, a second section builds a transactional stress-dropout model structured around two fundamental sources of stress, namely the constraints of psychological needs and of academic demands at school. In order to illustrate the explanatory value of this model, it is then shown that a wide variety of dropout profiles are structured around the emotional states of school boredom and school burnout, and that these profiles emerge within the stress-dropout process according to different kinds of school ruptures. A final section discusses the role of beliefs in the stress-dropout process, in particular justice beliefs and the motivational dilemmas they generate in situations of school dropout.

## 1 TWO COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES ON INDIVIDUAL STRESS

In science, the term “stress” is originally a physical notion describing the stress resulting from the application of a force on a solid body, which results in a deformation (or strain) proportional to a constant specific to each material. This stress

is given an unequivocal mathematical definition. By an equivocal conceptual analogy, individual stress refers in some contexts to the state of psychophysiological distress related to an environmental constraint (e.g., homeostatic deregulation, exhaustion, depression, anger, anxiety) and, in others, the environmental constraint that cause this distress (Hinkle, 1974; Wheaton, 1994). As a compromise, research privileges instead the notion of a “stress process” associated with person-environment (P-E) fit. In the light of authoritative authors, two complementary perspectives on this process seem to emerge, one focused on its objective or “concrete” reality, the other focused on its subjective or “abstract” reality. The first corresponds to the stress-dropout model proposed by Dupéré and colleagues, the second is elaborated in this article. Presenting these two perspectives is important to understand their complementarity.

### 1.1 Concrete Perspective: A Focus on the Effects of Stressors

In the perspective that might be called “concrete”, the stress process is defined in relation to the events or circumstances that lead to psychological distress (e.g., depression, anger, anxiety), called “stressors” (Pearlin et al., 1981; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013; Wheaton, 1994; Wheaton et al., 2013). The challenge here is to identify different kinds of stressors and to characterize their cumulative and multiplicative effects on distress, as well as the individual characteristics that intervene on these effects.

This line of research shows, first, that potential stressors can be discrete life events (aggression, divorce, birth, etc.) but also chronic situations (daily hassles, unfavorable social roles), temporary (transitions to adulthood or parenthood) or anticipated (fear of losing one’s job in a context of economic crisis), which together make up the “universe of stressors” (Wheaton, 1994). This universe has effects that depend on the kinds of stressors and their combinations. For example, discrete stressors are identified as having a sudden, dazzling effect on psychological distress, whereas chronic stressors act by gradual accumulation. In addition, exposure to stressors tends to generate new ones (“stress proliferation”) or to make the individual more vulnerable to subsequent stressors (Wheaton & Clarke, 2003). This last phenomenon, the diathesis-stress hypothesis, is reflected in the “life course” process conducive to dropping out in Dupéré et al. (2015) (see introduction).

However, stressors have more or less significant effects on distress depending on personal or social resources (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013). These include coping strategies (focused on treating the source of stress or its emotional consequences), social support and feelings of self-efficacy, which exert an influence first by limiting the effect of stressors and, second, by being eroded under the retroactive effect of psychological distress. They are thus conceived as having both moderating and mediating effects on stress. Resources also include beliefs, values, and the meaning of life; the latter can exacerbate stress as well as limit it, unlike the first resources. Their role in stress processes is seldom explained and appears secondary in this perspective.

## 1.2 Abstract Perspective: A Focus on the Experience of Stress

From a more “abstract” perspective, the stress process is defined as the emotional state of a transactional system that links psychophysiological and behavioral responses to P-E fit (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zautra, 2006). This perspective is well developed in Lazarus’s theory of emotions and can be synthesized as follows. Facing a situation of social demands or obligations, opportunities, or even cultural norms, the individual assesses how this situation affects his or her values (e.g., motivational needs) and beliefs about the world (e.g., controllability, meaning of events) and, if so, which responses are possible with regards to his or her resources (Lazarus, 1999). Here, beliefs are understood as worldviews that cognitively determine how values and resources are affected by the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The resulting interpretation takes the form of an abstract “tendency to act” which manifests itself concretely in a multitude of responses on physiological (e.g., neuroendocrine regulation), psychological (e.g., attitudes, thoughts, motives, construction of meaning etc.), and behavioral levels (e.g., performance, relationships with others; Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1999; Zautra, 2006). In turn, these multilayered responses influence the attributes of the environment (the stimuli) and of the person (the subjective evaluation), thus creating a P-E transactional process (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1991).

The emotional state then refers to the very process that drives these transactions, that is, the tendency to act of a specific P-E fit situation. This emotional state depends on the interpretation of the stimuli and can be either positive (“eustress”) when they appear relevant and congruent with the self, or negative (“distress”) when they appear relevant but incongruent (Lazarus, 1991). Two dimensions thus determine the emotional state, that is, the evaluation (importance for the self) and the regulation (by the resources) of the P-E fit process. This two-dimensional approach appears limited in Lazarus’s theory, because the emotional state can also depend on the type of self-involvement at stake (social status, values, personal ambitions, involvement of a significant other, etc.). However, other authors assume this two-dimensional approach by articulating it around dimensions of valence (i.e., evaluation) and activation (i.e., regulation; Barrett & Russell, 1999; Zautra, 2006). The emotional state is then called an “affect”, to differentiate it from the concrete emotions that emerge from this activated state. In fact, these two approaches (of Lazarus and of other authors) agree on the abstract status of the emotional state, that is, on the fact that it underpins the transactional system between the person, the environment and the individual responses emerging from the P-E fit. They differ, however, on the categorical or dimensional definition of emotional states. A compromise solution proposed by some authors—which I will adopt in this article—is to make a distinction between the abstract emotional states of the P-E transactional process and the concrete emotions that emerge from it in the form of perceptions or attitudes towards objects (e.g., emotions linked to the achievement, social relationships, learning; Barrett, 2006; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Of particular interest for our theoretical model, distress

arises when “specific internal or external [i.e., environment or self] demands (and the conflicts between these two) [...] are perceived as taxing or as exceeding individual resources”, which initiates a process of coping aimed at re-establishing a more positive emotional state (Lazarus, 1991, p. 112). More precisely, coping consists in intentional efforts (i.e., non-automated) that allow the cognitive reinterpretation of values and beliefs (e.g., making a compromise, modifying beliefs), or even stimuli (e.g., optimism, blaming others), but also behavioral modifications, notably through increased or diversified resource mobilization (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping efforts thus appear at the individual level as feedback loops going from the state of distress (i.e., the transactional responses) to the situation of P-E fit (i.e., the person and environment characteristics).

In sum, the “concrete” perspective used in the school dropout model of Dupéré et al. (2015) describes the objective reality of the stress process through its environmental sources and their impact on the proliferation and exacerbation of stressors, as well as on the mobilization and depletion of resources. This model enables articulating the individual and contextual risk factors of dropping out. The “abstract” perspective of the stress-dropout model presented in this article (see next sections) describes its subjective reality through the emotional states that underlie P-E transactions, thus shedding light on the motivational processes at stake. The emotional states of stress here depend on the way the individual evaluates and regulates the P-E fit, in particular through the adaptive processes of coping.

## 2 THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUAL STRESS IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Research converges to identify two fundamental sources of stress, namely situations that do not satisfy the needs of the individual (e.g., frustrated personal goals) and those that overwhelm resources (e.g., unpleasant or difficult social demands; Lazarus, 1991; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013). In what follows, it is argued that these two sources of stress correspond to the two dimensions of valence and activation of the emotional state which determine, respectively, if the situation is pleasant or not for the self and, if it activates more or less investment on the part of the individual (Barrett & Russell, 1999). They also correspond to two P-E fit models structured around individual needs (needs-supplies fit) and environmental demands (demands-resources fit; French et al., 1974, as cited in Edwards, 2008). The stress-dropout process can therefore be conceptualized based on these two P-E fit models, conceived as two distinct dimensions undergirding students’ emotional states.

### 2.1 Two Kinds of Dimensions in Student-Environment Fit

The “needs-supplies” fit process explains school motivation as a function of the congruence between student’s psychological needs and environmental supplies, following an interactive process between student and environmental attributes (Eccles et al., 1993; Fraser & Rentoul, 1980; Hunt, 1975). Motivational theories generally identify student needs in terms of affiliation (feeling socially integrated), academic

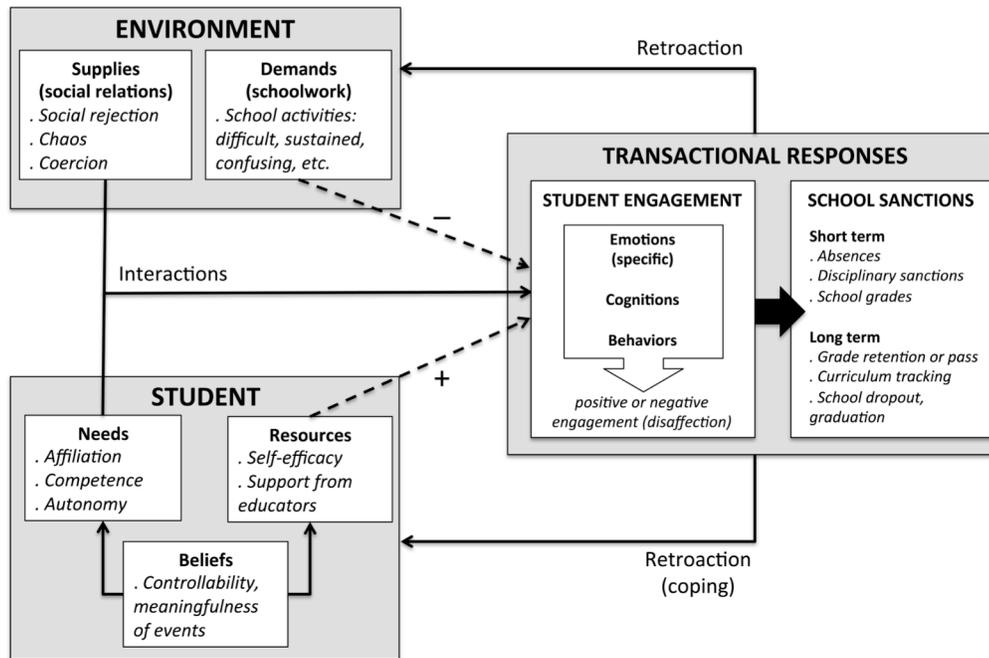


Figure 1. Stress process model of dropping out of school.

competence (feeling able to perform well at school) and autonomy (being at the initiative of the conditions of one's learning), which are satisfied depending on the quality of social relations with teachers, peers and parents (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In particular, these relationships frustrate or stress out psychological needs when they denote social rejection, chaos (unstructured social climate), and coercion, respectively.

Complementarily, the “demands-resources” fit process explains school motivation by the balance of power between school demands and student resources (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Demands and resources are assumed to have opposite additive effects on school burnout (e.g., exhaustion, cynicism, feelings of inadequacy) and on the quality of student engagement (e.g., vitality, dedication, absorption). More specifically, school demands refer to the characteristics of schoolwork (e.g., difficulty, rhythm, clarity), whereas resources refer to feelings of self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in success, perceived control at school) or to the help provided by educators when confronted with academic difficulties. The demands-resources fit process becomes deleterious for the student when the demands seem excessively difficult, sustained or confused in relation to schoolwork resources.

These two P-E fit models partly overlap but need to be differentiated. For example, social relations that support the need for competence can also be conceived as resources that help carrying out schoolwork. Yet, in practice, these social relations are most often measured by school valuing in the family and by the structured nature of teaching practices (e.g., organization and predictability of the course), making it very difficult to assess their actual contribution as resources for schoolwork (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Pitzer & Skinner, 2016; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Additionally, these two P-E fit models raise distinct issues concerning, on the one hand, the value of the developmental context (i.e., does it satisfy the

needs of the self?) and, on the other, its costs in terms of effort (i.e., which amount of resources does it require?). This distinction is important to elucidate the heterogeneity of school dropout profiles, as will be shown in the second section of this study. Therefore, the stress-dropout model presented in Figure 1 explicitly integrates both forms of fit as complementary dimensions. This model aims to integrate theories and draws mainly on the referenced studies; it separates environmental and student characteristics to make the fit processes more apparent. Aligning with educational research, this model assumes an interactive process for the needs-supplies fit (Hunt, 1975) and an additive process for the demands-resources fit (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). Environmental attributes include the quality of social relations and the perception of schoolwork activities, especially when these act negatively as “stressors”. Student's attributes include motivational needs (affiliation, competence, autonomy) and personal (feelings of self-efficacy) and social resources (educators' support in the face of academic difficulty), which moderate and compensate for the effects of school stressors. This model portrays social support as provided by school educators, but also by peers and parents (Barnard, 2004; Wentzel, 2009). Social relationships are thus involved in the stress-dropout process, both as motivational needs and as work resources.

In addition, our model takes into account a final student characteristic which is not apparent in existing P-E fit models, but which is important in the theory of individual stress, namely beliefs. As a reminder (cf. Lazarus's theory of emotions), these determine the way events are perceived (e.g., controllability, meaning) and, in particular, their relationship to the self. They are therefore included as modifying the two fit processes (see Figure 1), as will be explained in the last section of this article.

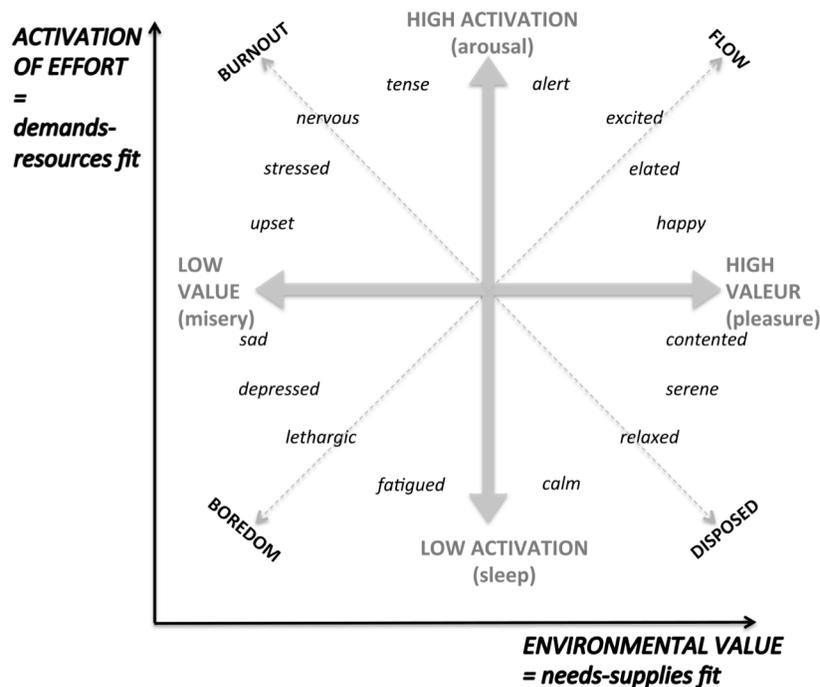


Figure 2. Emotional states as a function of student-environment fit (adapted from Barrett & Russell, 1999).

## 2.2 Emotional States as a Function of Student-Environment Fit Processes

Based on an abstract view on stress (see above), an emotional state is the tendency to action that underlies the P-E transaction as a whole and which can be thought of as a function of the valence and activation aroused by a stressful situation. In the stress-dropout model (Figure 1), we assume that these two dimensions correspond to two kinds of student-environment fit (presented supra), one establishing the value of the school environment for the self (needs-supplies fit), the other establishing the efforts necessary to carry out schoolwork (demands-resources fit; see Figure 2). This assumption can be traced back to existing motivational models that combine the two kinds of P-E fit in the form of pairs of perceptions. For example, the expectancy-value model (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) explains academic motivation as a function of expectations of success and self-efficacy (proxy for demands-resources fit), and as a function of the value of the task (proxy for needs-supplies fit). In a similar vein, Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia explain academic motivation by subjective perceptions of value (proxy for needs-supplies fit) and control (proxy for demands-resources fit) over the school situation (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

In keeping with these authors, emotional states appear in Figure 2 as depending on two kinds of student-environment fit. This conceptualization also integrates the emotional circumplex established by Barrett and Russell (1999) (called “affective circumplex”) and adapted by Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia as well. The dimensions of fit (i.e., activation and value) and emotions that appear in italics reproduce the affective circumplex of these authors; the emotions in bold, along with the dimensions of student-environment fit, are proposed in this article to describe the emotional states associated with the stress-dropout process depicted in Figure 1.

## 2.3 Transactional Responses to Student-Environment Fit

According to stress theory, emotional states result in a multiplicity of psychophysiological and behavioral responses that, in turn, act upon the P-E fit, thus creating a (circular) transactional process. Likewise, in the school context, emotional states determine school engagement processes (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). School engagement is conceived in the literature as comprising several dimensions, the most often cited of which are emotions, cognitions and behaviors (Fredricks et al., 2004). These dimensions are broken down into positive and negative compounds by some authors to distinguish school engagement from school disaffection (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In agreement with Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012), the emotions embedded within school engagement are conceived as denoting attitudes towards specific objects, such as emotions related to academic success, to learning in a subject matter, to social relations, etc. They are therefore distinct from the abstract emotional states portrayed in Figure 2.

Complementary components of school engagement have also been proposed, such as coping strategies and academic performance. Skinner and colleagues have conceptualized coping strategies that address difficult academic situations, in the form of behaviors, social support, and individual preferences (Skinner et al., 2003). This aligns with the conceptualization of the coping process as acting upon student-environment fit (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Paradoxically, however, coping strategies in these motivational models have subsequently been confined to the sphere of academic engagement, thus ignoring their retroactive effects on fit processes (Pitzer & Skinner, 2016). On the contrary, the coping process included in the stress-dropout model (Figure 1) is portrayed in the form of intentional feedbacks (i.e., non-spontaneous) that modify the

attributes of the pupil in his adjustment to the environment (i.e., beliefs, needs and resources), which seems more faithful to the conceptualization of Lazarus presented previously.

Other authors also include school performance as a part of school engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The stress-dropout model similarly includes school sanctions in general (absenteeism record, disciplinary punishments, school results, repetition, school guidance, dropping out), but these are separated from school engagement variables to emphasize that these are transactional responses at the environmental level, as opposed to the student level. Some of these sanctions act on the short term of the transactional process, others act on the long term via a cumulative process.

Finally, current research agrees that all facets of school engagement or school sanctions, in turn, act upon the characteristics of the environment and of the pupil (Hunt, 1975; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This hypothesis is essential in the transactional bio-ecological and social learning theories (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that form the basis of numerous of school motivational theories. It is also central to the conception of the stress process as a systems theory (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1991). The model in Figure 1 also includes such feedbacks (retroactions) from transactional responses.

### 3 SCHOOL DROPOUT AS A STRESS PROCESS: A VARIETY OF PATHWAYS LINKED TO BOREDOM AND BURNOUT EMOTIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, the working hypothesis of this article is that the heterogeneity of school dropout profiles revolves around the emotional states of burnout and boredom at school. These are portrayed in Figure 2. In this section, it is shown how these emotional states correspond to specific dropout profiles and how the stress-dropout model explains their emergence in terms of heterogeneous processes. The following argumentation is based on evidence concerning dropout profiles identified in international qualitative and quantitative studies and, in particular in France, in the 1995 national representative panel of the DEPP (Dardier et al., 2013) and in the Academic Districts of Nantes and Créteil (Bernard & Michaut, 2014, 2016).

#### 3.1 *Dropping Out of School Under Boredom*

School boredom can be characterized by learning situations that generate a state of activation that is both weak and unsatisfactory or unpleasant for the student (Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2012). This definition corresponds indeed to the state of boredom portrayed in Figure 2. This emotional state also corresponds to various dropout profiles, that nevertheless differ with regards to their specific stress processes.

Some dropout students are characterized by a rather favorable social background endowed with school capital, average or even high academic results, and symptoms of boredom such as nonchalance, disinterest and a devaluation of schooling (e.g., the “involved” profile in Bowers & Sprott, 2012; “uninterested in school” profile in Fortin et al., 2006; “disengaged” profile in Janosz et al., 2000; “lackadaisical” profile in Menzer & Hampel, 2009). This boredom does not stem from the difficulty of addressing school demands, but

from negative perceptions of the educational process (e.g., unstructured, restrictive) or the family context (e.g., conflicts, low emotional support), that is to say, from a frustration of the needs for autonomy and affiliation (see Figure 1). The lack of mobilization or activation of resources appears to represent a coping process stemming from this motivational frustration, which is reinforced by the behavioral symptoms observed among these dropouts. However, actual school leaving occurs lately for these students, because of to their satisfactory academic success. In France, this kind of profiles can also be found among students coming from a privileged or moderately high social background, who show signs of strong academic abilities during middle school, but also experience difficult personal events upon entering high school (e.g., divorce of parents, hospitalization, death of a relative) (about 8% of dropouts in the 1995 panel); or who have no particular enthusiasm for the job market, while also describing teaching methods and courses as inappropriate and uninteresting (“disengaged” profile, 17.1% of Créteil dropouts).

For other dropout profiles, boredom is associated with low academic grades associated with a lack of working resources—in particular a lack of academic support at home—which mutates into a process of disaffection from learning in the form of counter-normative attitudes, behavioral symptoms, and deviant affiliations (e.g., “excluded” profile in Bautier et al., 2002; “jaded” profiles from Bowers & Sprott, 2012; “school and social adjustment difficulties” profile in Fortin et al., 2006; “maladjusted” and “low-achieving” profiles in Janosz et al., 2000; “sabotaging the journey” profile in Lessard et al., 2008). This dropout profile is more common among students from a disadvantaged social background who are out of line with relational norms at school and who find themselves in situations of “cognitive dropout” with the course material or of “socio-cognitive misunderstandings” regarding teacher expectations at school (Bautier et al., 2002). These students exteriorize their school rupture by rejecting educational authority, especially that of the teaching staff. The latter staff usually reports unfavorable views on these students (Fortin et al., 2006) and, in turn, is often perceived as being unfair and biased by them (Bowers & Sprott, 2012). Confronted with a situation of school failure and a lack of working resources, the disaffection that arises among these dropouts can be explained—in terms of a coping process—as a means to modify beliefs (e.g., devaluation of schooling) and psychological needs (e.g., school disidentification), in particular to curb the “symbolic disqualification” (Millet & Thin, 2005) or “frustration of self-esteem” (Finn, 1989) associated with academic failure. This coping process can also result in affiliations with deviant or delinquent peers, but also in very early dropout behavior during middle school. The motivational processes associated with this dropout profile therefore appear as an epiphenomenon of a lack of academic resources, by contrast with the first type of dropout through boredom who possesses these resources. In France, this profile corresponds to dropouts associated with “great academic difficulties”, who cumulate disruptions both with regards to learning processes and to the teaching staff (25.6% and 28.6% of dropouts in Nantes and Créteil, respectively), or who attend special needs education during middle school (21% of

dropouts in the 1995 panel). It can also correspond to the profile of underprivileged pupils with major academic difficulties upon entering seventh grade, who leave school as soon as middle school (11% of dropouts in the 1995 panel); or to the profile of “rejection of the school institution”, which is characterized by negative perceptions of academic knowledge and an often non-chosen vocational education during high school, but also by the absence of social conflicts at school (20.3% and 13.3% of dropouts in Nantes and Créteil, respectively). (This latter profile suggests that the rejection of the schooling process does not necessarily entail behavioral problems or social deviance.) In a similar way to the two profiles presented, Blaya and Hayden (2003) associated dropping out due to boredom with the frustration experienced by “intellectually exceptional” pupils who feel stigmatized by those around them and little stimulated by teaching, but also with the frustration of students who perceive their schooling as a pathway of social relegation symbolized by academic failure.

### 3.2 *Dropping Out of School Under Burnout*

School burnout is defined as the state of exhaustion, cynicism and depersonalization (i.e., alienated relationship to one's existence) associated with the stress generated by student's low social status or by school demands (Walburg, 2014). Based on this definition, “burnout” appears to be a controversial notion in the literature because it is not nosologically distinct from depression (Bianchi et al., 2015). Alternatively, burnout can be defined by its association with an enduring misfit between the expectations and realities of work experienced by a “normal” (i.e., non-clinical) individual, which gradually generates emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and attitudinal and behavioral dysfunctions, which culminates in neurasthenia (Bianchi et al., 2015; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). This alternative definition of burnout as denoting a prolonged state of conflict between one's efforts and an unpleasant situation is the one portrayed in Figure 2, which is also consistent with the associated symptoms (i.e., stress, nervousness, tension). Burnout thus appears to be the opposite of boredom on the activation dimension of effort. Similarly to dropout profiles characterized by school boredom, dropping out through burnout appears heterogeneous in terms of the underlying stress processes it builds upon.

In the first place, school burnout characterizes dropout students undergoing significant academic pressure. For example, Blaya and Hayden (2003) report dropout cases in favorable social backgrounds that result from students' perceptions of educational expectations (e.g., from parents, school) as being excessively high. According to these authors, dropping out represents an act of repulsion or rebellion in the face of academic pressure, for example, following a forced tracking into a “prestigious” course. In terms of stress processes, this profile corresponds to a process of frustration regarding the need for autonomy, in the sense that the student is in a state of activation of intense efforts against his or her will. Likewise, the “depressive” dropout profile reported by Fortin et al. (2006) indicates an emotional state of burnout caused by parents' controlling behavior and by students' feelings of chronic failure, despite their obtaining average or high academic grades. Similarly, Bask and Salmela-Aro

(2013) show that burnout is higher among high school students attending the demanding academic track (vs. vocation track) and that cynicism towards schoolwork, in particular, is predictive of their dropout behavior. This dropout profile corresponds, in France, to that of students coming from privileged backgrounds who were enrolled in the general and technological tracks (i.e., academic tracks), but who failed to obtain the curriculum major of their choice upon the second year of high school (4% of dropouts in the 1995 panel) or who reported a strong fear of failure, in particular after failing to obtain the baccalaureate in the first attempt (“discouraged” profile, 14.4% of dropouts in Nantes).

The second profile of dropping out due to burnout is that of students who value school, but struggle in academics, despite a high level of behavioral commitment (e.g., “giving up” profile in Bautier et al., 2002; “discrete” profiles in Bowers & Sprott, 2012 and in Janosz et al., 2000; “prolonging the journey” profile in Lessard et al., 2008). This profile is in many ways similar to the dropout profile under boredom associated with academic difficulties and with a confusion surrounding the academic expectations, but it differs from the latter by its internalization of school ruptures (Bautier et al., 2002). Indeed, this profile presents the least important behavioral symptoms and tries to remain engaged in the schooling process, notably by concealing academic difficulties. In addition, this profile appears to report adherence to authority (Janosz et al., 2000) and views the teaching staff as fair and impartial (Bowers & Sprott, 2012). For these reasons, dropping out of school occurs later for these students and often comes as a surprise for the teaching staff. The only signs of dropping out in this profile consist in a mild absenteeism (Bowers & Sprott, 2012) and in occasional delinquent behaviors outside of school (Janosz et al., 2000). The coping process that seems to take place here is that of a compromising passivity, aimed at slowing down the dropout situation as much as possible, by maintaining the appearances of adaptation through signs of academic effort and social bonding with school. This profile is reminiscent of dropout students from the 1995 panel who presented significant academic difficulties during middle school, but who dropped out of vocational tracks much later during high school (21% of dropouts); but also of “discrete” dropouts identified in the Academic district of Créteil (21.5%) who were characterized by a disadvantaged social background, but also by a strong adherence to the school institution, for whom dropping out was experienced as an “accident” in the life course.

A third kind of dropouts associated with burnout concerns students who are invested academically but who exhaust their resources because of a conflict between academic demands and personal issues or work responsibilities outside of school, which are taken out of financial necessity (“burnout” or “accident” profiles in Lessard et al., 2008; “overwhelmed” profile in Menzer & Hampel, 2009). This profile can also be associated with early dropout following “personal problems” (family responsibilities, illness, parenthood, etc.), which represented 8.4% of dropouts in the Academic district of Nantes.

In sum, the boredom and burnout emotional states that emerge from stress processes characterize a wide variety of

school dropout profiles. Other profiles are more difficult to integrate and are not presented here (“attraction to working life” profile in Bernard & Michaut, 2014, 2016; “antisocial covert behaviors” profile in Fortin et al., 2006; “surprised” and “struggler” profiles in Menzer & Hampel, 2009). Yet, the goal here was not to be exhaustive but to illustrate how the stress-dropout model enables explaining the heterogeneity of dropout profiles. To date, few models enable doing this. For example, Finn (1989) theorized on processes of school disengagement (i.e., “nonparticipation and disidentification” model) and disaffection (i.e., “frustration of self-esteem” model), but these processes only accounted for school dropouts experiencing systematic school failure (especially among student with an unfavorable social background) and are not integrated within the same developmental process. Similarly, the dropout model proposed by Dupéré and colleagues (2015) concedes a major explanatory role to the environmental constraints experienced by disadvantaged students. However, as was shown in the present review, dropout processes are not reducible to the social inequalities underlying school failure, but comprise diversified student profiles from various social backgrounds and school situations.

#### 4 THE ROLE OF JUSTICE BELIEFS IN THE STRESS-DROPOUT PROCESS

One element of the stress-dropout model presented in Figure 1 remains to be explained, namely the role of beliefs. The last section of this article is particularly concerned with justice beliefs. These beliefs reflect the “cognitive illusion” that events in the world are governed by an apparently meritocratic principle, thus supporting perceptions of controllability and meaningfulness in one’s life (M. J. Lerner, 1980). This cognitive illusion impacts individual motivation differentially depending on the situation of fit or misfit with the environment, which gives it an ambivalent adaptive role in the stress-dropout process.

##### 4.1 *Justice Beliefs as Worldviews*

Justice beliefs determine schemata related to perceptions of regularity and predictability in the world, especially in the family environment (Dalbert & Radant, 2004; M. J. Lerner, 1980). Through social reinforcement, these beliefs subsequently gain motivational value by supporting the notion that individual efforts are rewarded (e.g., beliefs in “immanent justice” during childhood; Piaget, 1932, as cited in Dalbert, 2001). Expert literature therefore claims that beliefs of justice are a motivational need that supports the social commitment of the individual (M. J. Lerner & Miller, 1978). Some authors also hold that justice beliefs are a personal resource in the face of adversity (Dalbert, 2001), for example by limiting the emergence of negative emotions (stress, anger, anxiety) or perceptions (social discrimination, relative deprivation; Dalbert, 2002; Hafer & Olson, 1989; Lipkus & Siegler, 1993; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994). Overall, justice beliefs are conceived in multiple ways as reflecting cognitive schemata, motivational needs, and personal resources.

This “all-encompassing” conception of justice beliefs seems to confound its positive motivational effects with its fundamentally cognitive nature. It does not take into account,

moreover, the fact that believing that the world is fair to oneself while experiencing structural adversity (e.g., anticipated or real lasting unemployment) has deleterious effects on the self, by facilitating depressive symptoms (Benson & Ritter, 1990), or feelings of self-derogation when combined with low perceived self-efficacy (Bègue, 2005). In fact, justice beliefs require the existence of a psychological contract based on mutually beneficial relationships between the environment and the individual (M. J. Lerner, 1977; Miller, 2001). Threats to this contract result instead in negative attitudes (e.g., depression, self-derogation), but also compromise the adherence to normative behaviors and facilitate acts of retaliation against the perceived sources of injustice (Miller, 2001). Some studies thus show that justice beliefs are abandoned or weakened when a social situation is disadvantageous for the individual (Adoric, 2004; Bègue & Fumey, 2000; Sutton et al., 2008).

In short, although justice beliefs can have effects analogous to that of personal resources, they represent worldviews that influence motivation by orienting the cognitive interpretation of the environment and, in particular, of social situations affecting the self (M. J. Lerner, 1980).

##### 4.2 *Justice Beliefs and Motivational Dilemmas in Dropping Out*

Within the stress-dropout process, I submit that justice beliefs underlie student-environment fit (Figure 1). In general, these beliefs support adaptive behavior at school. However, in situations of school dropout, they appear to have contradictory protective or harmful effects for academic engagement or the self. They thus create motivational dilemmas leading to burnout or boredom profiles.

As protective resources, justice beliefs influence the needs-supplies fit processes by facilitating a favorable perception of social relations at school. For example, students who believe in a just world have better academic behaviors and performance because these beliefs increase the perceived fairness of teachers or school’s institutional authority (Dalbert, 2009; Donat et al., 2014; Gouveia-Pereira et al., 2003; Peter et al., 2012). Other studies also suggest that viewing the school system as legitimate in its procedures or fair, impartial, benevolent, etc., contributes to feelings of social affiliation and thereby limits absenteeism and dropout behavior at school (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Similarly, justice beliefs influence the demands-resources fit processes positively by supporting the view that school demands are benevolent and controllable, thus prompting the mobilization of resources. Some studies show that when experiencing failure on a task or an exam, individuals who believe that the world is fair are less likely to be frustrated because they more readily attribute this failure to their behavior, even when this behavior does not actually play a decisive role (e.g., failure feedback given randomly in an experimental situation; Hafer & Correy, 1999; Hafer & Olson, 1989). In addition, just world believers experience less psychological and physiological stress when faced with a task designed to be stressful (e.g., performing complex calculations as quickly as possible) by reinterpreting it as a challenge rather than as a threat, which results in better performance

(Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994).

Hence, beliefs about justice generally facilitate situations of (two-dimensional) fit between the student and the environment. For example in France, believing that school is fair to oneself was associated with less absenteeism among vocational high school students (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2012) and the injustice of the school system (and in particular school) was one of the major reasons reported by students to explain their dropping out of school (Bernard & Michaut, 2014; Lecigne & Cosnefroy, 2014).

Notwithstanding their adaptive features, I submit that justice beliefs nevertheless create dilemmas in situations of school difficulties, and that students' decisions before such dilemmas partly determines their school dropout profile. We previously argued that school dropout processes have their origin in social relationships that frustrate the self in terms of motivational needs or that denote a lack of resources to address academic demands, which results in coping processes aimed at modifying one of student's psychological spheres (i.e., beliefs, resources, needs; see Figure 1). However, if this coping aims to modify justice beliefs (i.e., feeling of academic injustice), this will cause to abandon their protective value concerning the way social relations at school and schoolwork are interpreted, thus facilitating student disaffection (cf. boredom profile associated with academic difficulty or motivational frustration). Alternatively, if the coping process is oriented towards changing resources or psychological needs, then it follows that the dropout student who does not have these resources will make a compromise with his or her psychological needs, by agreeing to maintain the superficial appearance of adaptation with school (cf. profile of burnout associated with academic difficulty). If, on the contrary, he or she has available resources and the conflict is motivational in nature (e.g., profile of burnout associated with academic pressure), then maintaining justice beliefs will imply persevering in the mobilization of school resources while contradicting the satisfaction of psychological needs (i.e., not wanting to provide these efforts), again leading to a depersonalized relationship to school.

Ultimately, neither maintaining nor rejecting justice beliefs will have a beneficial effect in such situations, although the choice made by the student will determine which dropout profile is more likely to emerge from these school ruptures. Similar to system-justifying ideologies (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), justice beliefs thus offer little relief for students experiencing an unfavorable school situation, but they protect and reinforce the favorable school situation of students who are more adapted in terms of psychological needs and academic resources. In other words, they seem to represent "insiders' beliefs" that mainly serve students who see themselves as belonging to the school system in the first place (Lannegrand-Willems, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This research built on the observation that intervention programs aimed at curbing early school leaving lack a general theory to explain the emergence of different dropout profiles, and that this lack of theorizing likely renders their actions ineffective. From this perspective, our goal was to sketch a

model of this heterogeneity by explaining dropout profiles as emerging from stress processes articulated around psychological needs and the academic demands weighing on students. It was argued that these two dimensions of stress explain a wide variety of dropout profiles, by integrating them around the emotional states of school boredom and school burnout. We also argued that justice beliefs played a cognitive role in stress processes, which partly determined the motivational dilemmas specific to each dropout profile. The theoretical model outlined in this article thus constitutes a first attempt to account for the heterogeneity of dropout processes in a way that might lead, in the long run, to intervention strategies targeting specific dropout profiles.

The constitutive elements of the proposed model have a strong empirical basis, but their overall coherence is only theoretical. In order to test this model more fully, future studies could focus on analyzing stressful situations involving both academic and social adjustment behavior, such as school transitions. School transitions indeed generate academic difficulties, but also psychological distress that facilitates dropout behavior at the start (elementary school, middle school; Bonn ry, 2011; Finn, 1993) and at the end of schooling (high school; Neild et al., 2008; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). Given that school transitions facilitate the emergence of dropout symptoms (attitudes, behaviors, academic results), future studies might assess the compensatory effects of social relations and work resources, in order to see if these moderations generate different dropout profiles in ways that concord with the theoretical model developed in the present research.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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