Job Burnout among Young Teachers from Private Higher Education Institutions in Shanghai and the Corresponding Intervention

Lian-Rong SUN
Shanghai Normal University Tianhua College, Shanghai, China
Summersun78@163.com

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Abstract. Based on the results of the burnout questionnaire surveyed among 146 young teachers from private higher education institutions in Shanghai, this study presented an investigation of the actual situation of job burnout and explored the general influential factors of job burnout. In addition, self-development counseling was used as an intervention method for 46 selected participants who displayed warning signs of burnout. The results showed that: (1) The job burnout rate of young male teachers was significantly higher than that of female teachers, and the severity grew with seniority of the teaching position. (2) An individual’s personality traits had significant predictive power over job burnout. (3) Self-development counseling was found to be an effective strategy to reduce the rate of teachers’ job burnout and improved emotional regulation abilities.

Introduction

Job burnout refers to symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction of individuals' sense of accomplishment in the occupational sector of human services [1]. Emotional exhaustion refers to the excessive consumption of emotional resources, fatigue, and loss of energy due to the requirements of interpersonal tasks. Depersonalization refers to individuals’ negative, callous, and excessively detached attitude towards clients, as well as a tendency to treat clients as inanimate objects. Low sense of accomplishment refers to individuals feeling inclined to give negative evaluations of themselves. In other words, individuals’ perceived competitiveness and feelings of accomplishment towards their job are reduced, and they tend to feel that progress is no longer possible in their job, or that the situation has digressed, compared to a past reference point, as opposed to improved.

Since Freudenberger first introduced the concept of job burnout in 1974, research in this area has attracted growing attention. According to the summary done by Kleiher et al. (1990), more than 2,500 papers on job burnout were published in the 1980s [2]. In particular, the debut of the First National Conference on Burnout in 1980 made its importance even more pronounced. It is worth noting that, in recent years, the coverage of research has also been extended to the field of education. As students become more diversified, and teaching tasks more complex, alongside high demands from parents and high expectations from society, a teacher’s job has become increasingly stressful, which has led to reduced efficiency and increased job burnout. Foreign research has shown that teachers are a high-risk group for job burnout, and individuals with a higher educational background are more likely to have job burnout than individuals who have received less prior education. In a study conducted by the American Teachers Association in 1983, 37.5% of the teachers manifested signs of job burnout, such as severe anxiety and mental stress [3]. In mainland China, teachers’ physical and mental health issues caused by job burnout have gained growing attention. At present, studies on the job burnout of teachers have mainly focused on the following three aspects: (1) The manifestation and influence of teachers’ job burnout—Schwab (1981) pointed out that the three typical manifestations of teachers’ job burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low sense of accomplishment) tend to seriously interfere with teachers’ physical and mental health, as well as generate negative influences on the education system and society [4]. (2) The causes of teachers’ job burnout—Studies have shown that social expectations,
ambiguity of organizational roles, and personal background are the three major factors leading to teachers’ job burnout [5]. Moreover, the development of burnout has been found to be correlated with locus of control; teachers with an external locus of control are more likely to suffer job burnout [6]. Other researchers have found that when teachers perceive that their higher-level needs can be satisfied at work (such as self-actualization and promotion of self-esteem), they are less likely to suffer job burnout. In addition, frequent occurrences of students’ problematic behaviors in the classroom and unfavorable educational settings are also causal factors of teachers’ job burnout [7].

(3) Measures to relieve the job burnout of teachers—Researchers believe that teachers’ job burnout should be improved through the joint effort of society, their organizations, and the individuals themselves [8, 9]. A large majority of scholars have proposed measures from an organizational intervention perspective, such as establishing “schools for teachers’ development,” strengthening training of teachers, and creating a democratic management environment [4].

In general, foreign countries are more sophisticated in their studies on job burnout, whereas in China, research on the topic is still at an early stage, and the majority of domestic studies are theoretical and review-based studies that have introduced the research achievements of other countries. A small number of empirical studies that focused on the job burnout of nurses and bank staff, and studies on teachers’ mental health, were more aimed at teachers from public colleges and universities. However, there is a lack of systematic investigation and research related to young teachers from private higher education institutions, who are more likely to suffer from job burnout due to the unique characteristics of the staffing system as well as teachers’ compensation and social status. Furthermore, the majority of the measures proposed to reduce job burnout are theoretical and descriptive, with low practical applicability and feasibility. In light of this research gap, this study recruited young teachers from private higher education institutions in Shanghai as research participants, adopted the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) and Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ), and conducted in-depth interviews with selected participants to investigate the actual situation and influential factors of job burnout. In addition, the preliminary effects of a job-burnout intervention, based on psychological counseling, were explored. The aim of this study was to provide a theoretical basis to improve teachers’ mental health, enhance their job performance, and optimize the management of corresponding organizations.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 183 young, full-time teachers from 4 private universities in Shanghai that provide bachelor’s degree programs participated in the survey; 146 valid responses were collected, yielding a valid response rate of 80%. Among the participants, 70 were males and 76 were females; 62 had worked as a teacher for less than 4 years (aged between 20 and 25 years old) and 84 had work experience as a teacher for 6 to 10 years (aged between 30 and 35 years old).

Instruments

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS). MBI-GS, proposed by Maslach et al. in 1986, is a revised version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI-GS includes three subscales measuring exhaustion (5 items), cynicism (5 items), and professional efficacy (6 items). The participants were asked to select the description that most suited their situation on a 7-point scale (ranging from 0 “never” to 6 “every day”). The exhaustion and cynicism subscales consist of indicative items; a greater average rating indicates more severe burnout. The professional efficacy subscale has counter-indicative items; a smaller average rating signifies more severe burnout. The exhaustion and cynicism subscales maintain a moderate correlation, while the professional efficacy subscale had little to no correlation with the other two subscales. A large number of studies have confirmed that the MBI and its various versions have good reliability and validity. The internal consistency coefficients of the three subscales are 0.88, 0.83, and 0.82, respectively [10].
**Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) for Adults.** EPQ is a self-reporting personality questionnaire with four subscales (85 items) that cover three dimensions. The three dimensions include extraversion/introversion (the E Scale, 21 items), neuroticism/stability (the N Scale, 24 items), and psychoticism/socialization (the P Scale, 20 items). In addition, the L Scale, based on lie/social desirability, serves as a validity verification test to determine whether the respondents are providing truthful answers. Some of the items are counter-indicative. It has been internationally recognized that the test-retest reliability, split-half reliability, internal consistency reliability, construct validity, and criterion validity of the questionnaire are all satisfactory.

**Procedure for the Self-Development Counseling.** In this study, the self-development counseling process was composed of three parts, including role-playing games, emotional regulation training, and mental health knowledge. The role-playing games adopted the games proposed in the studies of Xu (2009) and Mi (2005) and were determined to be suitable for the research participants of this study, such as musical chairs and psychodrama [11, 12]. For emotional regulation, the self-emotional control and regulation training strategies for adults, proposed by Clarke (2002) and Huang and Zhang (2004), were introduced [13, 14]. The mental health section was designed based on the ABC theory of emotion from positive psychology and cognitive therapy, which mainly introduced books and websites related to the construction of positive attitudes, optimization of emotional intelligence, and harmonious social relationships (such as the blogs of Zhang Yijun and Li Zixun and magazines such as “Psychologies”). The participants were asked to record, in detail, the number of projects, as well as the processes, in which they participated.

**Research Procedures**

The study included two parts, a questionnaire followed by the intervention process. Questionnaire: When communicating with the teachers’ universities, the researchers first stressed that the investigation was related to academic research. Next, consent of all the participants involved was obtained. Then, each participant was contacted individually for survey participation. A detailed introduction, regarding how the questionnaire should be completed, was given to the participants prior to conducting the survey. Intervention: The basic procedure of the intervention was as follows.

1. After consent was acquired, 50 participants with apparent symptoms of job burnout were selected to participate in the intervention activities.
2. Self-reported descriptions and data of the participants’ perceived emotional status and job burnout were collected.
3. The Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS) and Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) were introduced as tools to quantify participants’ job burnout status before the group counseling process.
4. The psychological counseling intervention was then implemented. Specifically, during a three-month period, emails, containing programs such as role-playing games, emotional regulation training, mental health knowledge, and a corresponding index and links, were distributed to the participants in a scientifically designed order to guide self-intervention.
5. The participants’ job burnout rate was then remeasured with the MBI-GS, SDS, and SAS.
6. The remeasured results were collected and compared to those collected prior to the intervention.

**Results**

SPSS 11.6 was used to analyze the data collected by this study.

**Statistical Analysis of Participants’ Personality and Job Burnout**

A summary of the participants’ MBI-GS and EPQ scores is listed in Table 1. A t-test was used to analyze the differences between participants of different genders and work experience. The results showed a noticeable difference in the ratings of the N and P Scales between male and female participants, a significant difference in the rating of the N Scale between participants of various work experience, and an apparent difference in the rating of the MBI-GS between participants of dissimilar genders and work experience. Specifically, there was a significant difference in emotional
stability (N Scale) between male and female participants \((t (144) = 0.431, p < 0.05)\) and participants with different work experience \((t (144) = 0.651, p < 0.01)\). Gender was also found to play a significant role in participants’ ratings of psychoticism (P Scale; \(t (144) = 0.422, p < 0.05\)). The manifestations of job burnout were also found to be differentiated between participants of different genders \((t (144) = 74.866, p < 0.05)\) and work experience \((t (144) = 65.574, p < 0.01)\).

### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants’ Personality and Job Burnout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>&lt;4 Years of Work Experience</th>
<th>6-10 Years of Work Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>(SD)</td>
<td>(N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.3201</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.5755</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.2882</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBI</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>86.2571</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Analysis of Influential Factors on Job Burnout

Initially, correlations between an individual’s personality and job burnout were examined. As shown in Table 2, the ratings of job burnout had a notably negative correlation with the scores of the E scale (greater E scale scores suggest a higher tendency for extraversion). Job burnout appeared to have significantly positive correlations with the scores of the N scale (greater N scale scores indicate more apparent manifestations of anxiety, moodiness, and strong emotions) and the P scale (greater P scale scores signify more intensified manifestations of stubbornness, loneliness, and difficulty to adapt to the environment). In addition, emotional exhaustion was found to have a more pronounced correlation with personality. Individuals who were more introverted, stubborn, and had less emotional stability appeared to have a more severe job burnout effect.

### Table 2. Correlation Analysis Results of Participants’ Personality and Job Burnout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(E)</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>(P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bM</td>
<td>-.451*</td>
<td>.417*</td>
<td>.462*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eM</td>
<td>-.786**</td>
<td>.621**</td>
<td>.512**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pM</td>
<td>-.392*</td>
<td>.468*</td>
<td>.399*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: bM represents physical exhaustion; eM refers to emotional exhaustion; and pM is mental exhaustion.

*p < 0.05 and **p < 0.01. The same applies to all tables in the following paragraphs.

Next, regression analysis was applied to investigate the predictive power of personality and job burnout. According to the findings, the ratings of the EPQ had a significant predictive effect on that of MBI-GS (Table 3). The predictive power of the N Scale appeared to be the highest (48.1%), followed by the P Scale (23.1%); and the predictive power of the E Scale was the lowest (11.8%).

### Table 3. Regression Analysis Results of Participants’ Personality and Job Burnout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(\beta)</th>
<th>(R^2)</th>
<th>(F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>-0.33*</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>9.507*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>0.680*</td>
<td>0.481</td>
<td>66.955*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0.492**</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>24.911**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the results of the regression analysis, pathway analysis was implemented, and the results are illustrated in Figure 1. As shown in the figure, the N Scale had a direct correlation with job burnout. The direct correlative effect of the P Scale on job burnout was not statistically apparent; however, it had an indirect impact on job burnout through the mediation effect of the E Scale. The direct correlative effect of the E Scale on job burnout was found to be significant.
Figure 1. Pathway Analysis of the Relationship between Personality and Job Burnout.

Effectiveness of the Self-Development Counseling Intervention

As the original data of four participants were not complete, they were excluded from final analysis. Hence, data from only 46 participants were employed to examine the effect of the self-development counseling intervention program. With regard to the number of programs that the participants participated in and the level of participation, we utilized a t-test to examine the differences in participants’ ratings of the MBI, SAS, and SDS scores prior to and following the intervention. According to the results exhibited in Table 4, only the ratings of the SDS showed no sign of impact.

Table 4. Effectiveness of the Group Counseling Intervention Program on Job Burnout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Intervention</th>
<th>Post-Intervention</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1.2571</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.7972</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAS</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.8876</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0.6702</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBI</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9.7565</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>7.1236</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Job Burnout Situation among Young Teachers from Private Higher Education Institutions in Shanghai and the Corresponding Intervention

In this study, we adopted the MBI-GS, a scale with confirmed satisfactory reliability and validity, to measure the job burnout of 146 young teachers from 4 private universities in Shanghai. The results were consistent with the description of teachers’ job burnout in past studies [15, 16]. According to the interpretation criteria of the MBI-GS, a total rating of less than 50 suggests that the respondents have a relatively good status, while a total rating of 50 to 75 or greater indicates that the respondents have a certain degree of job burnout and self-regulation is thus needed. The results of this study revealed that the severity of job burnout among male teachers was significantly greater than that of female teachers, and the severity of job burnout was substantially greater among
teachers with 6 to 10 years of work experience than that of teachers with less than 4 years of work experience. Following the survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with some of the investigated teachers. According to the findings, a possible explanation of the gender differences could be that men tend to have higher social expectations than women. Since the job as a teacher is relatively stable and routinized, women are more likely to fit into this job than men due to their mental characteristics and emotional stability. In terms of the dissimilarities found between different work experience groups, one apparent reason lies in the low social status of private higher education institutions in the present education system in China. For that reason, compared to teachers from public institutions, teachers from private higher education institutions are faced with many problems, such as insufficient resources, not being considered as staff of government-affiliated institutions, limited promotion and development opportunities, and low compensation. Nevertheless, due to the intensive competition in the market, the majority of private school teachers did not seek other opportunities. In addition, the interviews also revealed that income is another cause of job burnout. Teachers with lower income and longer work experience are inclined to develop feelings of hopelessness, which leads to relatively less enthusiasm and effort being invested in their job.

Influence of Personality on Job Burnout

In view of the feasibility of intervention on job burnout, taking a personality perspective appears to be a reasonable approach to the exploration of influential factors on job burnout. On that account, this study analyzed the correlation and influential pathways between individuals’ personality and job burnout. The study found that the negative correlation between extraversion and job burnout was the most pronounced; the more extroverted the participants were, the less severe the job burnout effect was found to be. Anxiety and interpersonal alienation were found to have the strongest positive correlation with job burnout; the more individuals manifested anxiety, worry, stubbornness, and loneliness, alongside a sense of difficulty to adapt to the environment, then the more severe the job burnout effect was inclined to be. Moreover, individuals’ emotional anxiety and stability were found to have the strongest predictive power over job burnout, while the predictive power of extraversion/introversion was found to be the weakest.

Therefore, the findings of this study, regarding the influence of private school teachers’ personality on their job burnout, are parallel to studies that employed other subject groups [17]. Among young teachers from private higher education institutions, individuals who are more extroverted, emotionally expressive, adept at social interaction, cheerful, and lively are less likely to develop job burnout. Contrarily, individuals who are introverted, who prefer quietness, are social outliers, do not like stimulation or adventure, or lack impulsive tendencies have a greater tendency to develop job burnout. In addition, the results of the interviews further confirmed that, since outgoing and social individuals are good at venting their feelings, rather than suppressing negative emotions, the likelihood of job burnout developing reduces. Individuals with habitual anxiety and those prone to strong emotional reactions when irritated, as well as those who exhibit inappropriate behaviors, are more likely to suffer from job burnout than individuals who have a mild temperament and are more emotionally self-regulated. A likely explanation is that individuals who are constantly anxious and emotionally unstable generally have a weaker sense of security and tend to continuously expand a small setback into a larger one, while lacking appropriate methods of releasing stress. As a result, they are more likely to suffer from burnout. In addition, individuals who are isolated, stubborn, strong-minded, and have difficulty adapting to the external environment and getting along with others are also a high-risk group for job burnout. Due to that sense of stubbornness, these people have a tendency to waste time on impossible or insolvable problems, rather than being flexible and seeking alternative solutions; they tend to complain a lot and become increasingly unsatisfied with the job and other people. It is therefore not surprising that they are prone to developing symptoms of burnout. Such job burnout is generally derived from their lack of ability to handle pressure from interpersonal relationships. Individuals who adjust their attitudes well, adapt to the environment, think from various perspectives, and care for others’ needs tend to
be better at regulating their own emotions as well as being appreciated by others. Therefore, they are more likely to obtain an extensive and effective social support system, and are thereby less likely to suffer burnout.

**The Intervention Effect of Self-Development Counseling on Job Burnout**

Based on the above findings and the analysis of the influencing factors, coupled with the characteristics of a teacher’s job, this study further implemented a self-development counseling program. The results of this study were consistent with the findings of domestic studies [18], which discovered that psychological counseling had a positive effect on the reduction of job burnout. In this study, participants’ depression levels were found to be within the “normal” range prior to the intervention; however, the severity of their anxiety and job burnout reached the “warning” threshold, indicating that intervention was necessary. After participating in the self-development counseling program, their job burnout and anxiety levels were significantly reduced, whereas no apparent changes were found in their depression levels. According to the information collected from communication with the participants, it was noted that they did feel that their emotions were better regulated than when compared to the situation prior to the intervention. In addition, they stressed that some of the mental health knowledge and self-regulation strategies alleviated their sense of helplessness and loneliness during job-related activities.

**Practice Implications**

In recent years, health problems within organizations have attracted growing attention. Many studies have begun to focus on issues related to employees’ health in organizational contexts, and in particular, mental health. Stress at work is an important factor affecting the mental health of employees. A large number of studies have found that, among various personality traits, emotional stability has the most direct impact on job burnout, followed by extraversion/introversion, while potential psychoticism or degree of stubbornness indirectly influence job burnout through the mediation of an extroverted/introverted personality. Therefore, it can be deduced that the major personality factors that affect job burnout are personality traits that can be adjusted. For that reason, the job burnout of young teachers from private higher education institutions can be reduced through emotional regulation training from an organizational and individual level and personality-reshaping measures. Detailed suggestions are as follows: (1) On an organizational level—It is suggested that private higher education institutions hire organizational psychology experts or counselors to help teachers improve their personalities in group communication-based settings through appropriate interventions such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), learning career development programs, and emotional management strategies that are best suited to the specific situation and best conducive to the health of the individuals in question, as well as establishing and expanding their own benign interpersonal support systems. (2) On an individual level—It is recommended that teachers fully cultivate their interest in the job, exert the extroverted, optimistic, active side of their personality, learn to rationally channel their negative emotions, develop strategies to ensure a positive emotional atmosphere, and establish an internal “balance of resources.” At the same time, having a more diversified, open-minded style of life is also an effective way to optimize one’s personality. In addition, one should control the drive for perfectionism in all things, and train oneself to think from perspectives that are both beneficial to releasing stress and the enhancement of interpersonal attractiveness. By combining measures from the above two levels, teachers are more likely to develop favorable personality traits and reduce severity of job burnout. Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, it is also suggested to develop and improve the field of occupational health psychology. It is recommended to rely on the implementation of the “Improving Teachers’ Quality Project” in Shanghai, construct a support system that helps teachers to actively deal with the effects of job burnout, improve regulation of emotions, and maintain one’s own mental health so as to increase the overall performance of young teachers in private higher education institutions in Shanghai.
Conclusions

1. Job burnout exists among young teachers from private higher education institutions in Shanghai. Moreover, the severity of job burnout tends to differ according to gender and years of service as a teacher.
2. An individual’s personality has significant predictive power over job burnout.
3. Self-development counseling is an effective way to reduce job burnout among young teachers from private higher education institutions and improve their emotional regulation ability.

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References

