

The Influencing Factors, Mechanism and Intervention Enlightenment of University Lecturers' Job Burnout: A Literature Review Based on Multi-Dimensional Research

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Abstract

This literature review, based on 7 core studies, explores university lecturers' job burnout. Defined via Maslach's three-dimensional OLBI's two-dimensional models, it is measured mainly by scales like MBI, OLBI, and BMS, with cross-national prevalence differences. Core influencing factors include emotional intelligence vs. emotional labor; psychological well-being and task-oriented coping; professional identity/satisfaction vs. heavy workload/role conflict. Situational factors include COVID-19-worsened burnout via online teaching issues; cultures shape burnout. Limitations include cross-sectional designs and self-report reliance. Future research needs longitudinal methods and objective indicators. Three-level interventions are proposed to provide a theoretical basis for targeted support.

Keywords

Deindividuation; Emotional exhaustion; Job burnout; University lecturers

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1. Introduction

Globally, workplace mental health has become an important public health challenge. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 10% of workers suffer from chronic stress, anxiety, job burnout or depression for a long time, which has become the second leading cause of unemployment, absenteeism, early retirement and even hospitalization ^[1]. Lecturers, as a typical profession with high emotional involvement, have become a high-risk group of job burnout because of their

continuous emotional needs, high-intensity interpersonal interaction and multi-task load. As the core force of higher education, university lecturers not only perform the dual responsibilities of teaching and scientific research, but also undertake the tasks of academic management and student guidance. In addition, changes in the external environment, such as the reform of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the transformation of online teaching during the epidemic, have further exacerbated the complexity of job burnout ^[2].

Although the existing studies have explored the formation mechanism of job burnout of university lecturers from the aspects of emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, coping strategies, and so on, the systematic integration of different cultural backgrounds, dynamic situational variables, and mediating and regulating paths is still insufficient. Therefore, based on seven core literatures, this paper reviews the concept and measurement of job burnout, key influencing factors and mechanisms, situational differences and health consequences, and research limitations and future prospects, aiming to systematically sort out the multi-level influencing factors and their paths of job burnout of university lecturers, and to provide a theoretical basis for the construction of targeted psychological intervention strategies.

2. Definition and measurement tools of university lecturers' job burnout

Since Freudenberg first proposed the concept of job burnout in 1974, Maslach and other scholars have gradually formed a widely accepted three-dimensional structure model, which includes emotional exhaustion, deindividuation or cynicism. And a reduced sense of personal accomplishment^[3]. In the follow-up study, the division of dimensions was further adjusted according to different cultural and occupational situations. For example, the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) simplifies it into two core dimensions of "exhaustion" and "alienation", which are more suitable for measuring job burnout in the context of collectivist culture. It avoids the cultural adaptability problems that may exist in the dimension of "personal accomplishment"^[4]. Other studies have reconstructed "personal accomplishment" as "occupational efficacy" to more clearly reflect its positive protective role in alleviating burnout^[2].

In terms of measurement methods, the existing studies mainly use self-report scales. Among them, Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and its revised version are the most widely used: MBI-ES is dedicated to the education industry and is often used to assess the performance of university lecturers in the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment^[1]. As a general version, MBI-GS is suitable for various occupational groups

through three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and occupational efficacy^[2]. The OLBI focuses on the characteristics of emotional labor of university lecturers, focusing on the two dimensions of "exhaustion" and "alienation", which effectively avoids the limitations of "personal accomplishment" in MBI in cross-cultural research^[4]. In addition, the Brief Burnout Scale (BMS), which contains only 10 items and is suitable for rapid screening of groups such as lecturer candidates, has a good reliability with an α coefficient of 0.91 for Cronbach's^[5].

According to the results of cross-national measurement, there are obvious differences in the prevalence of job burnout among university lecturers in different countries. Among university lecturers in Spain, 20.83 percent of individuals have emotional exhaustion, 5.26% show depersonalization, and 49.74% have low self-actualization^[5]. Among Chinese university lecturers, 31.9% showed a high level of burnout, and women were more likely to have emotional exhaustion, while men were more likely to show personalized tendencies^[6]. Among the Turkish lecturer candidates, 17% belong to the high burnout group, and 60.4% are in the medium burnout level^[5]. These data reveal that job burnout is not only universal among university lecturers, but also shows obvious differences due to different cultural and social backgrounds.

3. Core influencing factors and mechanism of job burnout of university lecturers

Emotion-related variables are the core internal factors affecting job burnout of university lecturers, which mainly affect the burnout process through "emotional regulation ability" and "emotional expression needs". Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as "the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate one's own and others' emotions", and its three dimensions are significantly associated with job burnout^[7]. Puertas-Molero studied 1316 Spanish university lecturers and found that emotional clarity and emotional repair negatively predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.13/\beta = -0.09$), and positively predicted personal accomplishment ($\beta = 0.22/\beta = 0.45$), indicating that clearly recognizing emotions and actively repairing negative emotions can reduce emotional resource consumption^[1]. Emotional attention was positively associated with emotional exhaustion (β

= 0.27), and excessive attention to negative emotions aggravated burnout.

Emotional clarity and emotional repair also indirectly reduce burnout through non-verbal communication, and the positive correlation coefficients between emotional clarity and non-verbal communication are 0.215 and 0.249, respectively. Martel and Santana further verified the “sequential development model” of emotional intelligence: emotion perception (basic dimension) → emotion understanding → emotion regulation (higher-order dimension) ^[2]. Emotional regulation not only directly affects emotional exhaustion or occupational efficacy ($\beta = 0.002/\beta = -0.055$), but also can improve self-acceptance, positive relationship and other dimensions of psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.554$). It indirectly reduced negative burnout ($\beta = -0.537$) and improved occupational efficacy ($\beta = 0.752$), which confirmed the full mediation of psychological well-being.

Emotional labor refers to “the process of regulating emotional expression in order to meet the requirements of work”, which can be divided into three categories: surface play, deep play and natural emotional expression ^[8]. A study of 1128 university lecturers in Pakistan showed that emotional labor positively predicted two dimensions of burnout, exhaustion ($\beta = 0.414, P < 0.001$) and alienation ($\beta = 0.302, P = 0.003$), and the negative effect of surface play was the most significant ^[4]. Empathy played a partial mediating role in the relationship between emotional labor and exhaustion (indirect effect = 0.090, 95% CI = 0.03–0.125). Although high empathy can promote the relationship between lecturers and students, it can also aggravate the consumption of emotional resources and form “empathy burden”.

Gender played a moderating role: male lecturers were more likely to be exhausted under the influence of emotional labor (interaction effect = 0.133, 95% CI = 0.035–0.225), which may be related to the gender norms of male “emotional suppression” in Pakistani culture. Psychological well-being (PWB) is based on Ryff’s multidimensional model, covering six core dimensions of self-acceptance, positive relationship, autonomy, environmental control, personal growth and life goals, which is the key mediator between individual internal resources and job burnout ^[9]. In addition to the path of “emotion regulation → psychological well-being

→ burnout” verified, the study in Spanish university lecturers provided further affirmation on the concept ^[2,5]. Multiple sub-dimensions of psychological well-being were significantly and negatively correlated with burnout: overall psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.097$) and sense of environmental control ($\beta = -0.104$) could effectively alleviate emotional exhaustion, while positive social relations ($\beta = -0.126$) could help reduce the tendency of depersonalization. It shows that good psychological state and environmental adaptability have a direct effect on alleviating burnout. Moreover, the study also found that lecturers with low self-actualization (49.74%) were more likely to have sleep disorders ($R = 0.287$) and emotional eating behavior ($R = 0.292$), which further verified the protective function of psychological well-being on job burnout from the perspective of physical and mental health.

Cynicism is reflected in the general suspicion of other people’s motives and the alienation of organizational norms, which plays an important intermediary role between lecturers’ job burnout and well-being. A study on 326 lecturer candidates in Turkey showed that job burnout not only significantly positively predicted the level of cynicism ($\beta = 0.56, P < 0.01$), but also negatively affected individual well-being ($\beta = -0.70, P < 0.01$) ^[5]. Structural equation model analysis further showed that cynicism had a significant negative predictive effect on well-being ($\beta = -0.40, P < 0.01$), and played a partial mediating effect between burnout and well-being (indirect effect = -0.39, 95% CI [-0.45, -0.33]). The study points out that lecturer candidates are more likely to form cynical attitudes because they face severe job competition (admission rate of civil service examination is less than 2%), thus exacerbating the vicious circle between burnout and declining well-being.

Coping strategies and defense mechanisms constitute lecturers’ behavioral and psychological response system in the face of occupational stress, and their types and frequency of usage directly affects the development of burnout. Zhao and Ding conducted a study on 204 university lecturers in China, which showed that task-oriented coping strategies (such as active problem solving) were significantly related to low burnout level ($t = 2.764, P = 0.007$), while lecturers with high burnout were more likely to use emotion-oriented coping (such as emotional catharsis, $t = -8.037, P < 0.001$) and avoidance-oriented coping ^[6]. In terms of defense mechanisms, lecturers with

high burnout tended to rely on immature defense styles, such as transfer ($t = -4.450$, $P < 0.001$) and regression ($t = -2.959$, $P = 0.004$), while lecturers with low burnout tended to use “denial” and “compensation” mechanisms to relieve stress through cognitive reconstruction and value transfer. In addition, the study among university lecturers in Pakistan adds that older lecturers are more likely to use adaptive strategies such as “positive reconstruction” and “religious help-seeking”, while younger lecturers tend to use “psychological disengagement” to cope with stress, which shows that there are significant age differences in the use of coping strategies ^[10].

Career identity reflects the individual’s internal acceptance and commitment to their professional values and roles, while job satisfaction reflects the overall positive evaluation of work experience, both of which are important predictors of job burnout. Based on the survey data of 483 Chinese university lecturers during the epidemic, Chen found that both professional identity ($\beta = -0.923$, $P < 0.001$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.462$, $P < 0.001$) had a significant negative predictive effect on job burnout ^[11]. Further mediating effect analysis showed that job satisfaction played a partial mediating role between professional identity and burnout, with a mediating effect value of -0.225 (95% CI $[-0.62, -0.41]$), indicating that professional identity not only directly alleviated burnout, but it can also indirectly reduce the level of burnout by improving job satisfaction.

University lecturers often face the conflict between the multiple roles of “teaching-research-management”, which constitutes an important external incentive for job burnout. Tello pointed out that there was a significant positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and workload of Spanish university lecturers ($R = 0.608$), and voice fatigue caused by long-term teaching was also closely related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.174$, $P < 0.001$) ^[5]. The research further shows that “teaching-research conflict” can indirectly aggravate job burnout by weakening lecturers’ self-efficacy, while perceived leadership support can alleviate such negative effects to some extent ^[12].

4. College lecturers’ job burnout under situational differences: Moderating effects of epidemic situation and culture

The outbreak of COVID-19 has promoted the systematic

transformation of teaching mode and provided a unique contextual background for exploring job burnout of university lecturers. The research shows that the multiple challenges faced by online teaching during the epidemic, including technical barriers, blurred work-family boundaries and declining quality of interpersonal interaction, have jointly led to a significant increase in the level of lecturer burnout ^[11].

Based on the survey data of 483 Chinese university lecturers, the study further reveals that lecturers’ professional identity and job satisfaction during the epidemic are lower than baseline level before the epidemic, and the accumulation of online teaching experience is positively correlated with the degree of burnout, that is, the longer they are engaged in online teaching, the higher the burnout scores reported by lecturers. Furthermore, lecturers with inadequate technical preparation are more likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion due to the pressure of teaching adaptation, and the effective technical support provided by school organizations can buffer the negative impact to some extent.

Emotional expression norms and professional role expectations under different cultural backgrounds significantly affect the manifestation and formation mechanism of lecturers’ job burnout, showing distinct cross-cultural differences. In countries dominated by collectivist culture, lecturers are generally constrained by the norm of “emotional suppression” and tend to avoid expressing negative emotions to students. This cultural expectation leads to surface acting as a common emotional labor strategy, which aggravates the consumption of emotional resources and burnout ^[4]. In Turkey, lecturer candidates face a highly competitive employment environment, especially the extremely low admission rate in the civil service examination, which leads to career anxiety that significantly increases the level of cynicism and indirectly exacerbates the development of burnout ^[13]. In contrast, in cultures such as Spain that emphasize work-life balance, burnout among university lecturers is more related to lifestyle factors. Studies have shown that lifestyle habits such as sedentary behavior ($R = 0.109$) and sleep disorders ($R = 0.287$) have a more prominent impact on burnout, reflecting the moderating role of cultural values in shaping burnout pathways ^[5].

5. Research limitations and future research directions

Although the existing studies have systematically discussed the multi-dimensional influencing factors of job burnout of university lecturers, there are still some limitations in research design, sample and measurement methods, and variable coverage:

- (1) Most empirical studies adopt cross-sectional design, it is difficult to establish the causal relationship between variables, especially the possible two-way influence mechanism between emotional intelligence and job burnout ^[11];
- (2) Most of the existing studies focus on a single country or cultural background, lacking systematic cross-cultural comparative analysis. On top of that, the measurement tools mainly rely on self-report scales, although some studies have not found serious common methodological bias through Harman's one-way test, but still need to introduce objective behavioral or physiological indicators to improve data validity ^[4];
- (3) Some potential factors, such as work-family conflict, peer support and institutional policy, have not been fully incorporated into the theoretical model. At the same time, there is still a lack of follow-up research on the long-term consequences of job burnout.

Based on the above limitations, future research can be further expanded from the following three aspects:

- (1) Methodologically, it is suggested that longitudinal research design or experience sampling method should be used to dynamically track the development trajectory of burnout, and objective indicators (such as cortisol level, classroom behavior observation) and subjective reports should be integrated to enhance the causal inference power and ecological validity of research results;
- (2) In terms of theoretical construction, we should expand the investigation of emerging variables, such as "work-life balance" and "digital teaching ability", in order to more comprehensively reflect the reality of contemporary university lecturers' work and its relationship with burnout;
- (3) In practice, we should strengthen the intervention research based on empirical evidence, and

design targeted intervention programs according to the verified influence mechanism, such as carrying out emotional intelligence training to enhance lecturers' emotional clarity and repair ability, or implementing organizational support programs to alleviate role conflict and provide psychological counseling, and scientifically evaluate their effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

Based on seven core literatures, this review systematically combs the concept, influencing factors and mechanism of job burnout of university lecturers, and draws the following core conclusions:

- (1) College lecturers' job burnout has high universality, and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low self-actualization are the core manifestations, which are significantly affected by culture and situation;
- (2) Emotional intelligence, psychological well-being and adaptive coping strategies are the core protective factors of burnout, while emotional labor, workload and cynicism are the risk factors;
- (3) Psychological well-being, job satisfaction and other variables play a mediating role in the formation of burnout, while gender and culture play a moderating role.

Based on the above conclusions, three levels of intervention implications are proposed:

- (1) At the individual level, lecturers' emotional intelligence and adaptive coping strategies can be improved through training, and the emotional labor played on the surface can be reduced.
- (2) At the organizational level, we should emphasize on optimizing work design, establishing lecturers' mental health monitoring and support system;
- (3) At the policy level, we should improve the evaluation system of university lecturers, balance "scientific research output" and "teaching quality", pay attention to lecturers' professional development and work-life balance, and reduce the risk of burnout from the institutional level.

The mental health of university lecturers is not only related to personal well-being, but also affects the quality

of higher education and the development of students. In the future, it is necessary to build a “individual-organization-policy” collaborative intervention system

through multi-disciplinary collaboration to provide more systematic support for the prevention and alleviation of job burnout among university lecturers.

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