



# Positive resources for combating job burnout among Chinese telephone operators: Resilience and psychological empowerment



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 October 2014

Received in revised form

22 May 2015

Accepted 24 May 2015

Available online 27 June 2015

### Keywords:

Telephone operator

Job burnout

Psychological empowerment

Resilience

Mediating role

## ABSTRACT

Job burnout is a major concern within the service industry. However, there is a lack of research exploring positive resources for combating burnout among telephone operators. The purpose of this study was to examine the associations between resilience, psychological empowerment, and job burnout, and the mediating role of psychological empowerment. A cross-sectional survey of 575 telephone operators was conducted in 2 call centers in Shandong Province, China. Self-report questionnaires were used to assess job burnout symptoms, resilience, and psychological empowerment. Hierarchical linear regression was performed to analyze the degree to which resilience and psychological empowerment are associated with job burnout, and the mediating role of psychological empowerment. The results showed that resilience and psychological empowerment had significant “net effects” on job burnout, which may represent positive resources for combating job burnout. Psychological empowerment may partially mediate the relationship between resilience and job burnout. Thus, interventions focused on resilience and psychological empowerment may be useful options for managers concerned about burnout.

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## 1. Introduction

Job burnout is a response to chronic work-related stress, and it is regarded as a major public health concern. It is common in jobs with a high degree of social interaction or demands, and in the helping professions (Maslach et al., 2001) such as social work, teaching, and healthcare. Job burnout has been shown to have a negative impact on occupational indicators, such as job performance, job satisfaction, absenteeism, and staff turnover (Linnerooth and Mrdjenovich, 2011). Furthermore, burnout symptoms have been linked to a variety of mental and physical health problems such as depression, insomnia, and gastrointestinal disturbances (Lee et al., 2011). Thus, burnout may lead to a number of adverse effects and it is consequently of interest to managers.

Telephone operators are at risk for job burnout, as they work in emotionally demanding situations and are regularly exposed to client complaints (Xu and Li, 2010). The prolonged contact and continuous service provided by telephone operators to clients can be emotionally draining and extremely stressful. Moreover, with the rapid development of the communications industry and the upsurge in telecommunications, work demands, business problems, competition, and operators' burdens are increasing. Therefore, telephone operators are likely to experience burnout.

Despite the number of studies on the factors contributing to burnout in high-risk groups, relatively few have explored the prevalence of burnout among telephone operators, which led us to focus on this group.

With the development of positive psychology, researchers have begun to focus on the important role of positive factors in combating burnout. Resilience, defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, and even significant sources of threat (Southwick and Charney, 2012), has been investigated as a potential protective factor against job burnout. Resilience attenuates the negative effects of stress (Jacelon, 1997; Ong et al., 2006), lowers the risk for psychiatric disorders and physical disease (Richardson, 2002), promotes one's ability to “bounce back” following stress, adversity, and trauma (Tugade et al., 2004; Wagnild, 2009; Patel and Goodman, 2007), and maintains stable levels of psychological and physical functioning in the face of stress (Bonanno, 2004). Studies suggest that job burnout can be reduced by increasing individuals' resilience (García and Calvo, 2012; Nedrow et al., 2013), as individuals with high levels of resilience are less affected by workplace stressors and consequently less susceptible to job-related burnout.

Furthermore, the positive effects of cognition and work attitudes, such as psychological empowerment (PE), can also help employees combat job stress and burnout (Vardi, 2000). PE, which is generally understood to be a psychological response to empowered work environments, is composed of four cognitions (meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact) and reflects the

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degree to which an individual feels motivated and competent to actively fulfill work expectations (Spreitzer, 1995). Many studies have defined PE as a potentially protective factor against the deleterious effects of work-related stressors on burnout, which are negatively related to work-related strain and burnout (Laschinger et al., 2006; Cavus and Demir, 2010). Therefore, increasing PE may effectively reduce job burnout.

Resilience and PE seem to play important and positive roles in combating job burnout. Nevertheless, their mechanisms are not well understood according to the research literature. The existing evidence shows that employees with higher levels of resilience are more likely to experience feelings of greater empowerment (Pines et al., 2012), which in turn, positively influences work behavior, job performance, and job burnout symptoms (Boudrias et al., 2012). Thus, we deduce that resilience could have an impact on job burnout through PE, namely, that PE might mediate the relationship between resilience and job burnout.

In light of the above discussion, the purpose of this study is to test the following hypotheses among Chinese telephone operators: 1) resilience and PE are negatively associated with burnout symptoms; and 2) PE mediates the association between resilience and job burnout. We expect that our findings of this study will provide scientific evidence for the prevention and intervention of job burnout in telephone operators.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and participants

This cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted with 600 telephone operators in 2 call centers, which were selected from a multi-center mobile communication company in Shandong Province, China. The primary responsibility of the telephone operators is to provide non face-to-face communication services, such as consultation, handling complaints, and business marketing. Participants were informed orally and in writing of the purpose of this research project, and were invited to participate in our study by answering a hardcopy of a self-administered questionnaire, which they completed in the break room following their shift. We obtained 575 completed questionnaires (effective response rate: 95.8%).

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Shandong University, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the commencement of the survey.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographic and work-related factors

A self-report questionnaire was used to collect the following demographic and work-related information: gender, age, education, marital status, economic status, work years, work shift (rotating shift and day shift), and group leader (yes and no).

#### 2.2.2. Job burnout

Burnout symptoms were assessed using the Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS), which was originally developed by Maslach, and then translated it into Chinese and revised it (Li and Shi, 2003). It consists of 15 items divided into three subscales: Emotional Exhaustion (EE; 5 items), Cynicism (CY; 4 items), and Reduced Personal Accomplishment (PA; 6 items). All items are scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from "never" to "every day." We used the mean of the scores on the items to assess job burnout; higher scores indicate higher levels of job burnout. Scores < 3 indicate lower burnout, 3–5 indicate moderate burnout, and > 5 indicate severe burnout (You et al., 2014). The Chinese version of the MBI-GS has been widely used in Chinese studies and has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity (Peng et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012a; Wu et al., 2007). The internal consistency coefficients for the three subscales ranged from 0.88 to 0.93 in this study.

#### 2.2.3. Resilience

Resilience was measured using the 10-item Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10) (Wang et al., 2010). The 10 items of the CD-RISC-10 (Campbell-Sills and Stein, 2007) were extracted from the original 25-item scale (Connor and Davidson, 2003). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 ("not all true") to 4 ("true nearly all of the time"), and higher scores indicate higher resilience. The CD-RISC (CDRISC-10) is thought to measure one latent factor of "resilience." The CD-RISC-10 has been shown to have good reliability (Notario-Pacheco et al., 2011;

Tran et al., 2013), and its reliability and validity in the Chinese population were documented in Wang's study (Wang et al., 2010). The internal consistency coefficient of scale in this research was 0.89.

#### 2.2.4. Psychological empowerment

PE was measured using the Chinese version of the Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES), an adaptation (Li et al., 2006) of Spreitzer's (1995) instrument. The PES is a 12-item questionnaire that measures employees' perceptions of meaning, competence, autonomy, and work impact, which are the four dimensions of PE. On a 5-point Likert scale, employees rate the degree to which they perceive each item as a current problem; higher scores indicate a greater degree of psychological empowerment. The internal consistency coefficient of the four subscales ranged from 0.83 to 0.90 in this study.

#### 2.2.5. Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 19.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. Student's *t*-test and one-way ANOVA were used to test the differences of job burnout among the categorical socio-demographic characteristics. Pearson's correlations were performed to examine the correlations among the continuous variables. Hierarchical linear regression was performed to explore the effects of resilience and psychological empowerment on burnout symptoms. Statistical significance for all analyses was set to  $P < 0.05$  (2-tailed). Finally, we examined whether psychological empowerment mediated the relationship between resilience and burnout using hierarchical regression models. Specifically, we conducted a set of hierarchical regression analyses to determine whether the following conditions of mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986) were met: (1) whether the independent variable was significantly correlated with the dependent variable; (2) whether the independent variable was significantly correlated with the mediator; (3) whether the mediator was correlated with the dependent variable; and (4) whether the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable was attenuated by the inclusion of the mediator in the regression model. Moreover, if the strength of the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable decreased, but still differed from zero, after the mediator was added, partial mediation was considered to have occurred (Frazier et al., 2004). The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) was conducted to examine whether the mediating effect was significant. All variables were linearly transformed to reduce multicollinearity. In addition, regression analyses were assessed for multicollinearity by calculating tolerance and variance inflation factors (VIFs). The diagnostic test showed that tolerance was well above the guideline of 0.2, whereas the VIF was well below 5 in all the regression analyses, indicating that there were no problems with multicollinearity in the data.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Participant characteristics

Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of 575 telephone operators (533 females, 42 males), ranging in age from 18 to 34 (mean =  $24.90 \pm 2.65$ ). The Pearson's correlations showed that age was associated with job burnout scores ( $r = -0.100$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The results of the *t*-tests and ANOVAs showed that job burnout scores differed significantly with respect to marital status, economic status, work years, and group leader position ( $P < 0.05$ ). The job burnout scores were significantly higher in unmarried telephone operators than the married ones. Telephone operators who worked 1–3 years and those of a lower economic status had higher scores on burnout. In addition, telephone operators who did not work as group leaders were more susceptible to job burnout. There were no significant differences in job burnout scores on the other socio-demographic variables.

### 3.2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for resilience, PE, and job burnout are shown in Table 2. The mean of the MBI-GS total scores was  $2.68 \pm 0.98$ , and the means of the subscale scores from high to low were as follows: EE ( $3.06 \pm 1.38$ ), PA ( $2.55 \pm 1.17$ ), and CY ( $2.40 \pm 1.45$ ). As shown in Table 3, the telephone operators reported varying levels of burnout: emotional

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