



## Relationships between individual-level factors and burnout: A meta-analysis of Chinese participants



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### ABSTRACT

We meta-analytically tested the relationships between job burnout dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment) and five factor model personality traits, personal resources, and coping strategies in Chinese participants. It showed that most of the variables considered were significantly related to job burnout dimensions in the expected direction. A comparison of the results of this study with Alarcon's meta analysis showed that the correlations of burnout with individual level factors were in the same direction, but the magnitudes of the effect sizes differed to a certain extent. Implications of the findings and future research directions were discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Job burnout is a three-dimensional syndrome in response to chronic work-related stressors, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Over the past years, much effort has been devoted to understanding what burnout is and why it occurs (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The causes of burnout are multifactorial and complex in nature, which are frequently grouped into three distinct levels: organizational, job and individual (Maslach et al., 2001). However, previous studies have focused primarily on the organizational or job characteristics (Lee & Ashforth, 1996), while individual factors have received only sporadic attention despite a general appreciation of their importance (Armon, Shirom, & Melamed, 2012).

There is a growing interest in investigating the individual factors contributing to job burnout in recent years, and a number of meta analyses are then available (Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). However, a problem with these meta-analyses is that the studies included are mostly conducted in the industrialized countries. Burnout has been

well acknowledged as a phenomenon of global significance (Golembiewski, Boudreau, Munzenrider, & Luo, 1996; Savicki, 2003) and differs across countries (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), thus it is necessary to expand burnout research "outside North America" (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2009) or "internationally" (Maslach et al., 2001). It points to the need to take into account cultural difference in burnout studies (Savicki, 2003). Chinese culture is characterized as low on individualism and high on collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), the salience of collective identity may motivate people to work hard and enthusiastically, and to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of collective interests. In addition, public expression of negative emotions toward people encountered at work is socially discouraged to maintain group harmony. This raises an interesting yet unanswered question: can the previous meta-analytic results be duplicated in Chinese context? It is expected that the correlations of burnout with individual factors are in the same direction because these factors are expected to be partially in-born, but the magnitude of the relationships might differ because of cultural difference.

The primary purpose of this meta-analysis is to investigate the relationship between job burnout and individual level factors in Chinese participants, including Five-factor model (FFM) of personality, personal resources, and coping strategies. Our meta-analysis represents a first attempt to investigate how burnout is linked to individual level factors in a collectivist context.

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### 1.1. FFM personality traits and job burnout

The FFM organizes personality traits into five broad factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 2008), and each factor has been theoretically assumed to be significant determinant of job burnout (Alarcon et al., 2009; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Lazarus, 1993; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). Extraversion is characterized by being sociable, energetic, outgoing and optimistic, and thus there is a general consensus that the extroverts have significantly lower scores on all burnout dimensions than the introverts (Maslach et al., 2001); Agreeableness is characterized by altruism, empathy, cooperation and helpfulness, thus individuals high in agreeableness may be better able to build a supportive social network to cope with excessive workload and interpersonal conflicts; Conscientiousness is characterized by personal competence, dutifulness and self-discipline, and thus it is linked with problem solving, support seeking, and cognitive restructuring behaviors (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007), which should help individuals reduce feeling of burnout. Thus, it intuitively makes sense to assume that these three personality traits are negatively related to job burnout. Neuroticism appears to be one of the most consistent positive predictors of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). It is characterized by a tendency toward emotionality, anxiety, hypersensitivity, worry, moodiness and depression, which are characteristic of job burnout. At last, individuals high in openness are more willing to try new things and have a positive attitude toward learning, thus it is reasonable to expect them to utilize effective and creative solutions to manage work stressors. As such, they may experience less emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. However, previous studies have shown that openness seems to have little theoretical relevance to depersonalization (Alarcon et al., 2009).

**Hypothesis 1.** Extraversion, agreeableness and conscientious are negatively related to burnout; neuroticism is positively related to burnout; openness is negatively related to emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, but not related to depersonalization.

### 1.2. Personal resources and job burnout

Personal resources are “the aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to individuals’ sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully” (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003), and can significantly affect the appraisal of work stresses and selection of coping strategies. A variety of personal resources have been identified (Lopez & Snyder, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), including self-efficacy, self-esteem, hope, optimism, and internal locus of control. They parallel to some extent the construct of core self evaluation that consists of self esteem, generalized self efficacy, locus of control and emotional stability (Judge & Bono, 2001), and psychological capitals that consists of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011). It has been suggested that personal resources are functional in achieving goals, protect the individuals from threats and associated physiological and psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated the value of personal resource variables in predicting burnout. For instance, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and locus of control have been shown to be negatively related to burnout (Alarcon et al., 2009; Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006). Optimism and hope have been shown to be negatively related to undesirable

attitudes (e.g., cynicism, job stress, and anxiety) and behaviors (e.g., deviance) (Avey et al., 2011).

**Hypothesis 2.** Personal resources (i.e., self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, optimism and hope) are negatively related to burnout.

### 1.3. Coping strategies and job burnout

Coping refers to the cognitive or behavioral efforts used to manage stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies can be viewed from an active (toward the stressors) or passive (away from the stressors) approach. In general, the use of active coping strategies is associated with low levels of burnout, whereas the use of passive coping strategies with high levels of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). From a COR perspective, active coping may enable individuals to gain resources, such as social support from coworkers or supervisors, and thus become less vulnerable to the threat or actual resource loss. On the other hand, the use of passive coping strategies may be detrimental, as individuals are less likely to gain new resources on one hand, and the demand will further increase on the other hand (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001). Passive coping may also make individuals feel that they are less capable of dealing with job demands, which can erode the perception of efficacy and accomplishment in the long run.

**Hypothesis 3.** Active coping is negatively related to burnout, whereas passive coping is positively related to burnout.

### 1.4. Moderators

We considered three continuous moderators that may potentially affect the relations between personal characteristics and burnout: year of publication, female percentage, and mean age of participants. First, the inclusion of year of publication as a moderator can provide a unique view of how the large sociocultural environment affects the relations examined in this study. The rapid economic growth and social change over the past decades in China bring with them a radical change in the working environment of employees, thus potentially increasing the risks to their health and well being (Schaufeli et al., 2009). For this reason, the relationship between individual factors and burnout can be shaped by the sociocultural context. Second, burnout has been suggested to be more of a female experience (Maslach et al., 2001; Purvanova & Muros, 2010). Females are assumed to be more psychologically distressed than males, and more likely to express feelings of emotional and physical fatigue in stressful work settings. In addition, female employees may face more challenges such as sexual harassment, discrimination, low payment, and extra household responsibility. Thus one can expect important gender difference in their reactions to job stresses. Third, the burnout level is consistently higher in younger employees than in older employees (Maslach et al., 2001). The observed age difference might be accounted for by that young employees are less experienced and lack interpersonal skills necessary for coping with job stresses, thus age may also be a potential moderator affecting the relationship between individual factors and burnout.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Literature search

We searched Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database (<http://www.cnki.net>) for studies written in Chinese

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