



Job burnout of construction project managers in China: A cross-sectional analysis

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Abstract

Construction project managers (CPMs) of contractors encounter a great deal of stress. The authors used job burnout as the core indicator of CPMs' chronic psychological stress. An occupation-oriented job burnout scale was developed based on MBI-GS. Then, a structural equation model was developed to investigate the cause and effect of job burnout among CPMs. The results show that CPMs suffer from a high level of job burnout, of which the major symptom is physical and mental fatigue. The highest level of job burnout occurs when CPMs reach their mid-forties, which highlighting their midlife professional crisis. Job stress significantly aggravates CPMs' job burnout, and rather than traditional project objective management, stakeholder relationship management is the main stressor. Direct and indirect mitigating effects on CPMs' job burnout are also obtained from the management system of construction companies. Additionally, job burnout ultimately causes poor health conditions among CPMs and increases their turnover intention.

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1. Introduction

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy experienced in response to chronic job stressors (Leiter and Maslach, 2004). These chronic stressors may not be as intense as an acute stressor, such as a natural disaster or a major accident, but they persist over longer periods of time. These types of stressors tend to have a more negative impact on health because they are sustained and thus require the body to respond physically and

psychologically on a daily basis (Day and Livingstone, 2001). These responses deplete a person's physical and psychological resources more quickly (Dallman and Bhatnagar, 2011) and can lead to burnout, particularly among those who work continuously under circumstances in which these stressors cannot be avoided.

Construction projects involve multiple stakeholders who complete a large number of unpredictable tasks in a complex process and within a limited period of time (Leung et al., 2008a). Among all professionals, construction project managers (CPMs) of contractors are the key figures in achieving project success throughout the construction process because they are responsible for planning the construction program, organizing human resources, controlling operations and the budget, and so on (Leung et al., 2009). Hence, CPMs, referring specifically to the construction project manager of

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contractors in this research, often encounter a great deal of stress for long periods of time from the launch to the delivery of a project, which puts them at high risk for job burnout.

Moreover, according to a survey conducted by *Construction and Architecture* in China, CPMs may also face excessive administrative interventions, corruption, illegal bidding competitions, excessive public relations activities and so on (Wang, 2010). In public relations activities with powerful stakeholders, CPMs may sacrifice their dignity and even violate morality and the law, creating unwillingness, anger, anxiety, fear and other negative emotions. The negativity accelerates the process by which CPMs become emotionally drained and increases their level of job burnout.

Due to the significant negative impacts of burnout on job performance, organizational behaviors, health and well-being (Maslach et al., 1996), solving the job burnout problem faced by CPMs in China is urgent. Many international organizations and countries have already launched a series of guidelines concerning the psychological stress of general practitioners (WHO et al., 2004; Euro-WHO et al., 2008; UK Health and Safety Executive, 2009; ILO, 2012; Japan: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015). In particular, the Japanese government has revised the law mandating the use of the Stress Check Program (Japan: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015) at least once per year in all workplaces in Japan with 50 or more employees to screen for workers with high psychosocial stress.

However, the Chinese government and academic research communities continue to pay little attention to this issue. Subsequently, an occupation-oriented job burnout measurement tool and the corresponding analytic mechanism for CPMs are still lacking. Therefore, the authors used job burnout as the core indicator of CPMs' chronic psychological stress and developed an occupation-oriented psychometric scale for CPMs' job burnout based on the MBI-GS scale. Subsequently, a causal analysis of CPMs' job burnout was conducted using a structural equation model based on the job demand-resource (JD-R) Model.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction of job burnout

The term “job burnout” was coined by Freudenberg in 1974 to refer to an occupational psychological syndrome (Freudenberg, 1974). Subsequently, Maslach performed significant studies on the subject, and most recent studies have been conducted based on Maslach's theory. Maslach began her research by focusing on people who provided human services (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) and developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) (Maslach et al., 1986). Considering that chronic stressors in general occupations originate mainly from tasks rather than from interpersonal interactions with service recipients, Maslach developed the MBI-GS (General Survey), in which job burnout was defined in three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism and low professional efficacy (Schaufeli

and Leiter, 1996). Exhaustion describes physical and mental fatigue and a lack of motivation, cynicism reflects indifference or an attitude of distance toward work and professional efficacy measures both social and nonsocial aspects of occupational accomplishments.

An extensive literature review shows that most previous studies have focused on job burnout among teachers, policemen and nurses. Many of these researchers have developed specific occupation-oriented job burnout scales based on the MBI scales to improve their psychometric accuracy and applicability in research (Kim et al., 2007; Weckwerth and Flynn, 2006; Woerfel et al., 2015). In addition, scholars have also focused on systematically understanding the causes and costs of job burnout. Hence, a variety of models have been proposed, such as the job demand-control (JD-C) model (Karasek, 1979), the job demand-control-support (JD-C-S) model (Johnson and Hall, 1988), the effort-reward imbalance (ERI) model (Siegrist, 1996) and the job demand-resource (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001). Based on these models, most researchers study job burnout using statistical analysis, correlation analysis or structural equation modeling.

2.2. Related research in the construction industry

Early in 1984, scholars realized that professionals engaged in project-based work experienced significant work-related stress due to the wide scope of their responsibilities coupled with limited resources and authority (Slevin and Pinto, 1987). Afterwards, this ever-present nature of conflict and psychological stress in project-based work was heavily discussed in the project management literature. However, few studies have pursued the subsequent cause/effect relationship of this chronic stress, namely, the propensity for project managers and team members to develop burnout from their responsibilities (Pinto et al., 2014). For example, Sonnentag revealed that stressors were positively related to burnout among software professionals (Sonnentag et al., 1994). Emelander found that project managers experienced moderate burnout, which had a significant correlation with intrinsic needs fulfillment in project-based work (Emelander, 2011). Two notable works were proposed by Pinto. Based on the Job Demand-Control-Support Model, he found that control and social support served as moderators for the burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion and cynicism in project-intensive organizations (Pinto et al., 2014). Then, he further explored the differential effects of job title and project type on job demands and job burnout. The results showed that project managers had a significantly higher level of the emotional exhaustion form of burnout than other job classifications and that construction project personnel suffered from a significantly higher level of emotional exhaustion than those working on other classes of projects (Pinto et al., 2016).

However, only a few scholars have addressed job burnout specifically in the construction industry, for example, Leung and Yip in Hong Kong and Lingard in Australia. Leung has conducted a series of job stress studies on different types of practitioners in the construction industry (Leung et al., 2008a,

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