

EMPATHY IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

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Abstract

The rise of bullying incidences in educational institutions in Malaysia is a major concern that triggers the effort to review the roles of academics as 'human service workers' who interact with students in instilling moral values. However, this responsibility could lead to the phenomenon of burnout among academics. A literature review on the concept of 'burnout' indicates that it is caused by two factors – environment at workplace and the nature of work engaged by the workers. The nature of work of academics that involves 'compassionate communication' or 'empathy' towards students could lead to burnout among academics. This process of communication is further explained by understanding the concept of 'empathy' and how it functions in causing burnout. Besides that, environmental factors at work place such as workload, role conflict and role ambiguity are also the major factors that could lead to burnout among academics. Other factors such as bureaucratic red tape, lack of respect towards employees, favoritism and insincere strategies by the employers could affect employees' trust and motivation towards the organization. A review of previous studies on the phenomenon of burnout among academics in private and public universities revealed that besides the pressure of heavy teaching work load and unfavorable working environment; academics also face the pressure of career development which is based on their contribution from research and international recognitions. Hence, all these factors could lead to burnout among academics which will consequently hinder the efforts to instill moral values among students.

Keywords: Bullying, Empathy, Burnout, Equity Theory, Cognitive Appraisal Theory

1 INTRODUCTION

"Educating the mind without educating the heart
is no education at all."

Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)

Academics are the backbones of educational institutions. They are the workforce in producing human capitals to achieve the aspirations of our nations. One of the many roles of academics is to impart knowledge to students in order to equip them with the hard skills needed by the industry. In achieving this purpose, academics are responsible in teaching, training, facilitating, monitoring, and assessing students' abilities and achievements. On the other hand, with the rapid progress of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education, academics face new challenges in keeping abreast with the latest technology in disseminating knowledge. They also have to be well-informed about the latest issues concerning their area of studies, conduct researches and provide informative solutions which are relevant to the needs or problems faced by the society.

Beyond all those responsibilities, academics play crucial roles in guiding students towards practicing moral values in their daily life and in dealing with other humans. In fact, instilling moral values is a process

towards moral development that involves continuous interactions between academics and students.

Santrock (2011) defines moral development as "rules and conventions about just interactions between people. These rules involve three domains – cognitive, behavioral and emotional. Cognitive domain is how students reason or think about rules for ethical conduct. Behavioral domain is how students actually behave, and emotional domain is on how students morally feel. For instance, do they associate strong enough guilt feelings with an immoral action to resist performing that action? Do they show empathy toward others?" (p. 97).

The questions of students' emotional state of mind and the feeling of 'empathy' when interacting with other people have always been the focus of concern by members of the society, especially when dealing with disciplinary problems among students. For instance, in June 2017, Malaysians were alarmed by the incidence of bullying which caused the death of a student in National Defence University of Malaysia (Kumar, 2017). He was tortured for two days on campus by his friends and died due to 80% of burnt inflicted by an iron on his body. Two weeks later, another bullying case occurred due to hate crime which cost the life of a high school student who was beaten by his former schoolmates (Thevadass & Sekaran, 2017).

Both of the bullying cases occurred in educational institutions in Malaysia where incidences of bullying are very rampant. According to Vijaindren (2017), statistics from the Education Ministry revealed that between 2012 and 2015; more than 14,000 cases of physical bullying occurred in schools.

However, most of the bullying cases were ignored by the management of the educational institutions in order to focus on academic achievements and to maintain the positive image of the institutions. In most of the cases, the victims will be transferred to other schools; yet, the perpetrators will remain in the same schools with the expectation that they will eventually leave the school upon the completion of their study. Hence, by ignoring the incidence; the schools' managements convey the message that condones the act of bullying (Rajaendram, 2017)

Consequently, in solving the issue of bullying among students, members of the public and the stakeholders have demanded via mass media that more should be done by academics to educate the students on the importance of practicing 'empathy' in handling bullying cases (Hariati, 2017).

Besides that, the tragedies have also highlighted the fact that the roles of the academics are not only to impart knowledge but they are also 'human service workers' whose responsibilities involve teaching students on how to deal with emotions and how to treat other human beings with empathy and respect; regardless of race, religion and belief.

Miller, Stiff and Ellis (1988, as cited in Miller, 2011) have acknowledged the roles of teachers and academics as one of the categories of human service workers (besides health care and social workers) who choose to be in that profession "because they are 'people oriented' and feel a high degree of empathy for others". However, they have also discovered the fact that 'emotional communication' i.e. empathy could lead to the phenomenon of burnout among teachers and academics (p.206).

Besides fulfilling the demand from members of the society and stakeholders, the role of academics in providing emotional support to students is often being overwhelmed by other priorities stipulated by the educational institutions. Academics major duty is to ensure that students achieve good grades in their studies. On the other hand, academics face high workload, role conflict, lack of facilities and many other factors that could lead to burnout.

Consequently, the phenomenon of burnout among academics will hamper their interaction with students and this will affect students' welfare, mental states and overall performances (Maslach & Leiter (1995), as cited in Chen & et.al., 2014).

Therefore, it is imperative for us to understand the concept of 'empathy' and how it could lead to burnout among academics. What is empathy? To what extent the feeling of 'empathy' can be effectively delivered between academics and students within educational institutions? How could 'empathy' lead to the phenomenon of 'burnout' among academics? What are the other significant factors that could lead to 'burnout' among academics?

In order to answer these questions, we will refer to the Model of Empathy, Communication and Burnout (Miller, 2015). We will explain the concept of 'empathy' and how it could lead to burnout among academics. Besides that, we will discuss the concept of burnout among academics by referring to Maslach (1982) and other relevant theories. We will also discuss previous studies on burnout among academics, and finally offer solutions to the problems.

2 WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

First introduced in 1974 by Freudenberger, the term 'burnout' is a condition when one feels 'worn out' due to pressures of work. Burnout is caused by stressful events. Miller (2011) describes the stressful events as some aspects of the environments which are known as 'stressors' that create a strain on the individual and eventually caused burnout.

Kahn and Byosiere's (1992) illustrated the cause and effects relationship between stressors (organizational stress), responses to stress (operational stress), and consequences of stress (work-related burnout) in their Conceptual Model of Occupational Stress and Work-related Burnout as shown below:

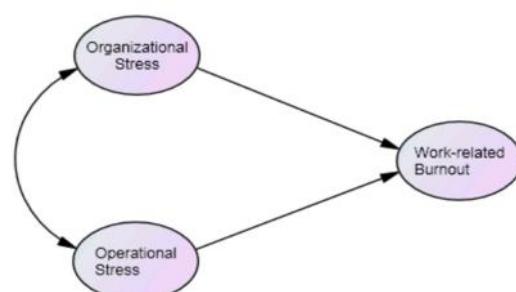


FIGURE 1: Conceptual Model of Occupational Stress and Work-related Burnout

Based on the above model, Kahn and Byosiere (1992) conceptualized the source of stressors in organizations such as physiological and psychological (i.e., depression, job satisfaction). Besides that they also relate it to behavioral responses to stress and how eventually stress affects health in the forms of illness-related problems such as heart-attack, burnout, diminished concentration, diminished performance in other daily roles in life, and diminished organizational performance (i.e., turnover, absenteeism).

Generally, most scholars agreed that there are two major sources of stress that could lead to burnout. They are known as organizational stress and operational stress (Alexander et al., 1993; Violanti and Aron, 1995; Storch and Panzarella, 1996).

2.1 Organizational Stress

Organizational stress is broadly defined as certain characteristics of the organization and behaviors of its employees that may create stress for the employees. Miller (2015) said that the environmental factors at workplace such as workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, life events and conflict at home or at workplace which are known as 'stressors' could trigger burnout". Further explanations of these factors are illustrated in Miller's (2015) Basic Model of Stress in the Workplace as shown below:

TABLE 1: Basic Model of Stress in the Workplace

Stressors	Burnout	Outcomes
Environmental factors that are difficult for an individual to deal with: Workload, Role conflict, Role ambiguity, Life events, Home/work conflict	Strain that results from ongoing stressors: Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalisation, Decreased personal accomplishment	Physiological, attitudinal, and organisational results of burnout: Coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, lower job satisfaction, less commitment, turnover.

"Role conflict involves having two or more role requirements that clash with each other and role ambiguity exists when there is uncertainty about role requirements. Besides that, the daily commitment and the emotional strain of balancing work and home life would also lead to burnout" (Miller, 2015, p.205).

Another significant study on burnout was done by Maslach (1982) who categorized the concept of burnout into three interrelated dimensions i.e. emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment and depersonalization as explained below:

2.1.1 Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is the feeling of fatigue, frustration, used up, or unable to face another day on the job. Disrespected employees may need to mask their true emotional reaction regarding how their organization treats them while they assist their clients. This masking and suppression could increase emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2003).

Besides that, disrespectful behavior can contribute to burnout by negatively influencing employees' feelings of trust towards the organization. Professor Catherine Bailey (2017) in the School of Business, Management and Economics at the University of Sussex says that the mismanagement of meaningfulness in the workplace is giving rise to what she describes as 'existential labor'. When employees view any strategies as self-serving, not genuine or incoherent; the employer says one thing but does another, then the strategies are all viewed meaningless by employees and can actually have negative consequences.

As a result, instead of being honest, the employees will fake their actions or pretend for the sake of their career advancement, pride or the fear of negative repercussions; such as job loss, stigma or career blocking. However, by pretending, the employees are wasting their emotional resources which will lead to exhaustion, burn out or the intention to quit.

2.1.2 Lack of Personal Accomplishment

Lack of personal accomplishment occurs when workers perceive themselves as failures and incapable of effectively accomplishing job requirements. As a result, workers who are uncertain about their opinions or abilities will often compare themselves with others. Hence, any practice of favoritism will cause organizational stress that affects the morale and wellbeing of employees. (Festinger, 1954 as cited in Klockars et al., 2007).

This was further explained by Adams (1965) in his Theory of Psychological Equity which views 'inequity' as a situation when discrimination occurs in the benefits given to an individual if compared to another. Thus, inequity will lead to a range of negative outcomes to emotion and motivation (as cited in Huseman et.al., 1987).

Besides that, the occurrence of 'red tape' in bureaucratic processes, perceived lack of support from the community and leaders, and lack of promotion opportunities in the organization have been emphasized as organizational stressors (Stinchcomb, 2004).

Other causes of burnout are inconsistency in discipline procedures and management style, as well as lack of administrative support. Furthermore, the problems of excessive workload and administrative duties, and the inefficiency of bureaucracy can also create a stressful work environment (Violanti and Aron, 1995).

2.1.3 Depersonalization

The last dimension is depersonalization which is relevant only to workers who must communicate interpersonally with others (e.g. clients, patients, students) as part of the job. "When burned out, such workers tend to view other people through rust-colored

glasses – developing a poor opinion of them, expecting the worst from them, and even actively disliking them" (Miller, 2015, p. 204). For example, due to burnout; academics will have negative perceptions on their students and show lack of empathy towards them.

Van Dierendonck, Schaufeli and Buunk (2001) explain that if workers are pessimist about their job; they will easily admit that they are tired of their job and this will lead to burnout which will negatively affect their health. Eventually, the workers may divert their focus only to the negative aspects of their job.

2.2 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is defined as characteristics of a profession that requires employees to interact intensively with others (Ellison, 2004). Such stress appears as people interact with each other, or deals with organizational policies and environmental circumstances (Stinchcomb, 2004; Miller, 2005).

According to Finn and Tomz (1998), compared to other professions, those whose nature of job is to deal with other people's problems such as educators and health care workers suffer more stress than other professions. Besides that, the nature of job that requires one to communicate with clients at workplace may also cause burnout. For example, academics who are being empathetic or having 'emotional communication' with students will result in personal distress and burnout.

Empathy is a state of mind that has been studied by many scholars and is linked to many other concepts which are explained below:

3 WHAT IS EMPATHY?

Originated from the German word 'Einfühlung' which was specifically used in psychotherapy; the word 'empathy' found its way into the English dictionary in 1910. However, unlike the word 'sympathy' which is rooted from the Greek word 'patheos' that means 'illness', 'suffering', or 'to suffer with'; 'Einfühlung', in contrast is related to the concept of appreciation (Shlien, 1997). Therefore, the words 'empathy' and 'sympathy' are two words with different meanings.

Oxford English Dictionary (2002) explains the difference between the words 'empathy' and 'sympathy'. 'Empathy' is defined as "the ability to understand and share the feelings of someone else. If you have 'empathy' for someone; you understand and share their feelings, whereas if you have 'sympathy' for them, you feel sorry for them." (p. 85)

In addition, many literatures have explained the link between empathy with other concepts such as: personal distress and empathic distress; perspective-taking; sympathy; prosocial behaviour and aggression; and moral reasoning, justice, and altruism. The following

are the explanations of each concepts in chronological order:

3.1 Perspective-taking

Nathanson (2003) describes perspective-taking as "the cognitive mediator that is responsible for empathy." Eisenberg, Zhou and Keller (2001) describe empathic perspective-taking as a process whereby individuals comprehend others' states of mind. This ability requires awareness and self-other differentiation.

3.2 Personal Distress and Empathic Distress

Empathy for another person's distress will cause personal distress to the person who offers help. In order to diminish the personal distress experienced due to the feeling of empathy to others, he or she will offer help (Batson, 1987, Eisenberg, 2000). Therefore, rather than being altruistic, the motive of offering help is egoistic and self-centred (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). As a result, those who experience acute personal distress may also avoid conflict and/or exposure to the negative emotions of others.

According to Hoffman (2000), empathic distress is a negative affective response which occurs due to attention given to other person's distress. Empathic distress motivates prosocial moral action since those who experience it genuinely want to relieve the suffering of others. The feeling of empathic distress may develop into the feeling of sympathetic distress or compassion for the victim.

3.3 Sympathy

Generally, sympathy is known to derive from empathy. It is the feeling of sadness or caring for others (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). However, the concept of sympathy is perceived negatively by Goleman (2006). He described sympathy as a superficial feeling of sorry for another person; as one does not even experience at all the distress of the other person. In contrast, Eisenberg, Zhou and Koller (2001) said that the findings by important researchers show that sympathy is merely an 'emotional distance' and not a 'detachment' which allows helpers to execute moral actions or prosocial behavior without any obstruction.

3.4 Prosocial Behavior and Aggression.

According to Barbarin & Odom (2009), prosocial behaviour is the act of "caring about the welfare and rights of others, feeling concern and empathy for them, and acting in a way that benefits others." These include selfless acts as well as appreciating the perspectives of others (as cited in Santrock, 2011).

Besides that, Santrock (2011) explained that “learning to share is an important aspect of prosocial behaviour. It is important that children develop a belief that sharing is an obligatory part of a social relationship and involves a question of right or wrong. It is also important that children experience gratitude, a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation, especially in response to someone doing something kind or helpful.”(p.100).

On the other hand, empathy and aggression are inversely related. According to Schulz, Izard & Bear (2004), “High levels of empathy may prevent aggressive interactions both by signaling the empathically aroused child to attend to the other’s emotion and by helping children anticipate how others will feel when they enact particular behaviors” (p. 373).

4 HOW DOES EMPATHY LEAD TO BURNOUT?

The connection between ‘emotional communication’ which involves empathy and how it leads to burnout is further explained by Miller (2015) in her Model of Empathy, Communication and Burnout.

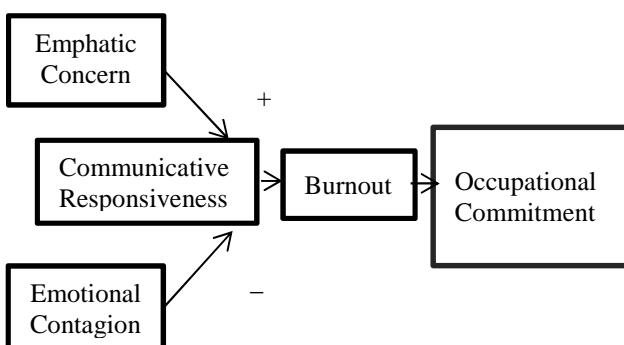


Figure 2: Model of Empathy, Communication, and Burnout

There are two different ways on how a person feels empathy towards others. They are known as ‘Emphatic Concern’ and ‘Emotional Contagion’. Emphatic Concern involves the feeling ‘for’ others which means a teacher might feel concern about the students’ problems but the teacher does not share the bullying problem. On the other hand, Emotional Contagion means that teachers feel ‘with’ the students which means teachers feel sad and grieving about the problem that the students are facing. Therefore, practicing Empathic Concern means teachers are more psychologically detached from the students’ personal turmoil which enables them to be communicatively responsive in helping the students. In contrast, teachers who are emotionally attached with the students’ problems will decrease their responsiveness and eventually will lead to ‘burnout’ and finally will affect their occupational commitment. In other words, they will become less committed to their responsibilities as teachers.

5 THE OUTCOMES DUE TO BURNOUT

Eventually, burnout among academics may affect their health. They may suffer from coronary heart disease, high blood pressure and many other health issues. Besides that, burnout may affect the attitude of the academics. They will experience lower job satisfaction and less commitment and finally, the entire organization will face the problem of high turnover.

Echoing this opinion are Folkman and Lazarus et.al. (1984) who introduced the Cognitive Appraisal Theory. They explained that when an individual appraises stress as a strain that is over consuming his or her resources; he or she will intensely respond to the situation. Thus, in the worst case, those with better job alternatives, or more commitment to their profession will end up quitting their job.

Eventually, the organizations are run by neglected and neglectful individuals who have figured out how to cope or survive in the organization by mentally turning over (Hughes, 2001).

6 PREVIOUS STUDIES

A study to determine the burnout characteristics of 229 academics from private universities in Malaysia was conducted by Chen and et.al. (2014). It was discovered that approximately 6% of the academics demonstrated burnout characteristics. The highest level of burnout was among young junior academics (associate lecturers, lecturers or senior lecturers) within the age range of 31 – 40 years old.

The reasons being are due to the fact that younger academics are given higher teaching workload. Besides that, they have to teach undergraduate students who require more guidance compared to graduate students. Another possible explanation is that compared to senior academics; younger academics struggled to be promoted, being more ambitious and possess higher expectations. They are also involved in research and aimed for international recognition. Hence, they are more prone to stress and burnout (Blix et al., 1994, Kokkinos, 2007, as cited in Chen and et.al., 2014).

In addition, Chen and et.al.(2014) found that academics also faced burnout due to unfavourable working environment. The conditions are the opposite of favourable working environment which is defined as “work place that are clean, safe, quiet, conducive, cosy, spacious, well-ventilated and with sufficient lighting”. All these could enhance the academics’ motivations and prevent burnout (Renzi et al., 2005 as cited in Chen and et. al, 2014).

In another study, Noor Hassim Ismail and Arma Noor (2016) assessed the prevalence of occupational stress among 380 academic staff in a research university in Malaysia. They investigated the association and correlation between stress and job factors which are career development, research, teaching and interpersonal relationship. The overall result showed that the source of stress among the academicians is due to career development. This includes the environment provided by the university and the expectation to publish their research for promotion which contributed to stress

7 SOLUTIONS

One of the solutions to reduce the problem of burnout is by treating employees with respect which has been shown to increase trust in management (Laschinger & Finegan, 2005). Respect has also been proven to positively influence one's self-regard (Goffman, 1959, 1963; Greenberg, 1993; Miller, 2001). The performance evaluation system in the organization should be improved to eradicate elements of favoritism and nepotism in order to practice honesty and transparency in evaluating the academics' performance. In addition, the management should be sincere and impartial in providing conducive working environments and in giving benefits and incentives to academics.

Another way to reduce burnout is by giving autonomy or discretion to determine the processes and schedules involved in completing a task (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Hence, academic should be given more discretion in determining their teaching pedagogy and students' assessments.

Besides that, the management of the private educational institution should be more concern about the quality of education given to the students rather than focusing on quantity or profits to be earned. Heavy teaching workload and big number of students in each classes are the factors that contribute to burnout among academics. Therefore, the management should reduce teaching workload among academics in order to prevent burnout. It is also very important to recognize the roles of academics who constantly face the challenges not only in teaching the students, but they also face the hassles of students' behaviors. They are responsible in advising the students and solving the students' emotional problems with empathy and compassion. This awareness about the roles of academics will help to curb the occurrence of occupational burnout among academics.

7 CONCLUSION

A review into the concept of 'empathy' in the communication between teachers and students has provided us with insights on how it helps students to deal with emotional problems. In doing so, we seek to understand that communicating the emotion of

'empathy' could on the other hand, lead to the phenomenon of burnout among academics. We also have highlighted the fact that work environments such as how respectful and disrespectful the employers are towards employees will have a major influence on the employees' motivations. In this context, factors such as high workload, role conflicts, role ambiguity, family and home conflicts could also lead to the phenomenon of burnout such as emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishments and depersonalization. All these will eventually affects the commitment of academics in giving their service to students. Hence, for academics who are committed to the 'human service' professions, finding an organization that is more respectful might be an avenue of hope in what otherwise could lead to a high burnout situation. In this case, treating academics with respect and dignity and giving them due recognition may assist in enhancing their commitment in inculcating moral values among students.

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