



The Relationships between Job role, supervisory support and Burnout among Professional Caregivers of People with Intellectual Disability.

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships between job role, supervisory support, and burnout among professional caregivers of individuals with intellectual disability. Using a cross-sectional correlational design, data were collected from professional caregivers through demographic questionnaires, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and measures of supervisory support. A total of 34 participants were included in the analysis. Results from the Mann–Whitney U test indicated no significant relationship between job role and burnout across the three subscales: emotional exhaustion ($U=31.000$, $p=.364$), depersonalization ($U=44.000$, $p=.539$), and personal accomplishment ($U=58.500$, $p=.922$). However, descriptive statistics revealed that managers reported slightly higher emotional exhaustion ($M=23.33$) compared to frontline staff ($M=21.28$). Educational level also showed no correlation with personal accomplishment, despite 55% of participants holding undergraduate degrees and 29% holding master's degrees. Supervisory support was found to have a positive effect on reducing burnout. A Kendall's tau b correlation revealed no significant association with emotional exhaustion ($p=.169$), but supervisory support was significantly associated with lower depersonalization ($r=-.393$, $p=.008$) and greater personal accomplishment ($r=.369$, $p=.010$). These findings highlight the importance of organizational and social support systems in buffering against certain dimensions of burnout, even when workload and job role are not significant predictors.

Keywords: Job Role, Supervisory Support, Burnout, Professional Caregivers, Intellectual Disability



Introduction

Maslach & Schaufeli (1993) noted that burnout surfaced in the 1970's. Though, there are proofs and write ups that first highlighted cases of burn out as far back as the 1920's. One of the various books of Thomas Mann on analysis of the protagonist in *Buddenbrooks* (1922) was referenced, the book stressed on similar descriptions of symptoms of burnout experienced by the character in the book which includes: severe fatigue, reduced drive for the job. Another renowned book cited was Graham Green's novel a case of burnout in 1960. The signs displayed by characters in the novel also match up with the present signs of burnout people experience.

Much later, in the year 1974 Freudenberger a psychologist who worked at a facility that provided human services noticed that people who volunteered at his work were slowly showing a decline in achieving excellence, and goals. These individuals also showed loss of interest and reduced drive for excellence with respect to both mental and physical wellbeing of themselves and clients. Unaware of Freudenberger's observations in 1976, Maslach a psychologist began to learn ways most people get to manage their emotions at work. She considered individual's inability to show love and care to others as a form of self-protection at work. By opportunity she discovered her study already included the term burnout which was used by poor lawyers. She and her colleagues pioneered the term 'burnout' in the 1980's and became one of the most famous researcher of the phenomenon. (Cited in Maslach & Schaufeli, p.3)

Farber (1980) suggested that factors that gave rise to development of burnout among human service professionals included events following the World War II in which human services that were originally community based became professionalized to meet certain standard and to provide clients with rights to quality professional services. He also added that an increasing drive towards independence (shift away from the community) and a need for personal achievement through one's work as some of the prerequisite for burnout. He noted the combinations of the two factors has created workers with high demand for fulfillment with limited coping resources (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). The theoretical concept according to Farber that the desire to accomplish is a prerequisite for burnout is also hypothesized in this current study.

Burnout has generally been defined 'as a condition of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion which arises when workers feel overstressed by the difficulty of long term participation in emotional challenging situations' (Skirrow & Hatton, 2006, p 132). This definition of burnout considers effects of individual's long term experience of stressful events.

Workers experience burn out as a result of continuous work demands with no timeout to refresh leading to fatigue, fear, discouragement and eventually failure on the job. This occurs mostly as a result of conflict of individual intentions and the reality of the work (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Furthermore, Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998, p. 8) noted that the symptoms of burnout do not occur spontaneously but slowly and unrecognized by the individual. Additionally, burnout also occurs as a result of the pressure an individual places on themselves with limited coping strategies to combat the pressure.



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There are three major aspects that are considered to be characteristic of burnout, they are; feelings of emotional exhaustion, loss of feelings of accomplishment on the job, and a depersonalization (Skirrow & Hatton, 2006). Lee & Ashforth (1990) postulate that whenever an individual is assessed for burnout in human services, the three aspects specified should be applied. Emotional exhaustion occurs when a person's coping resources has been overused and drained (Schaufeli, 1999). Emotional exhaustion occurs as a result of prolonged stressful job demands without time to refresh. Emotional exhaustion have often been found to predict job burnout (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998).

Depersonalization refers to unattached and un-empathic feelings towards the people one provide services to (Schaufeli, 1999, p.19). It is characterized by a meanness towards others. People develop depersonalization, a form of detachment due to an inability to cope with work pile and frustration that occurs as a result of the work demands. For Maslach and Goldberg (1998) individuals create this detachment, as a protection from all the demands, however, it leads to a devastating feeling of an inability to show care or love to others. They noted that depersonalization in burnout is the basic personal skills aspect of burnout.

Loss of feelings of personal accomplishment according to Maslach & Goldberg (1998, p 64) refers to a fearful state of mind accompanied by an inability to do the job which in turn leads to failure and total breakdown of the individual. They postulate that some of the contributing factor is the frustrating lack of support from colleagues coupled with limited growth opportunities within the organization. Inability to effectively carry out task leads to perceived sense of failure among staff. The state of loss of personal accomplishments have been found to correlate with depression. (Maslach and Goldberg)

According to Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) burnout does not occur spontaneously but as a result of prolonged exposure to demanding work environment. Shin Rosario, Morch & Chestnut (1984, cited in Gilbert, 2013) shared similar view that burnout is the result of conflict arising between the individual and the stressful working environment. Based on several of the literatures reviewed, burnout and stress appears to be the popular factor affecting the quality of service for professional caregivers of individuals with intellectual disability. Several studies have shown that a lot of professional caregivers working with people with intellectual disability experience high levels of stress and burnout. Borritz et al (2005) conducted an intervention study for a period of five years in different organizations that provide human service including organizations for the disabled and residential services in Denmark. Burnout was measured with a tool named the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory subscales included (individual burnout, service user burnout, and work-related burnout) which they developed for the purpose of research. Residential caregivers, professional carers of people with disability and midwives were found to have experienced the highest level of burnout relating to their job and service users. Kenney (2013) examined the relationship between stress and job satisfaction among 68 Irish primary school teachers and the role of personality. She found that teachers that reported high levels of stress also reported low levels of job satisfaction. Recently, Gilbert (2013) examined correlations between personality



types and areas of work and burnout. The result revealed that burnout occurs as a result of work demands and personality factors. She found burnout occurs as a result of dissatisfaction with several work demand. Individual personality neuroticism were found to predict emotional exhaustion.

Studies have found that specific job roles carries more burden organizational burden than others leading to exhaustion and withdrawal of emotions from clients (Skirrow & Hatton, 2006, p. 139). In their systematic meta-analysis review of several studies conducted on burnout among caregivers who worked with people with intellectual disability they found that job role correlated positively with burnout among unqualified caregivers in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. They also found that manager's more than frontline staff reported higher levels of personal accomplishment of goals. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization was said to be same amongst the two groups. Skirrow & Hatton noted that managers had educational qualification when compared with the frontline group who had little or no qualification in intellectual disability study. This they suggest was responsible for their higher level of personal accomplishment levels. This present study will examine whether burnout occurs due to specific job role or a combination of job roles.

Managers or supervisor who employ a leadership style that is relaxed, approachable and generally takes a socially positive orientated approach at work tend to correlate negatively with burnout (O'Driscoll & Schubert, 1988 as cited in Schaufeli & Buunk, 1996, p. 322).

Research has shown support at work is a moderating factor at reducing burnout especially social support received from the supervisor or work manager. Grey et al (2010) found that encouragement and support from managers helped to reduce the effects of stress on direct social care givers. Bakker et al (2005, p. 177) also found that availability of resources including managerial support increased work satisfaction and general well-being of volunteers of people who are seriously ill. Resources that were found to be effective includes good relationship with managers, support from other members of staff, and feedback on work performances. Therefore this present study predicts the following:

Methodology

The participants in this study were professional caregivers of individual with intellectual disability. The researcher used this group of people because previous studies have found them to experience more burnout as a result of the several job demands they are faced with on the job. The study is a quantitative measure using a cross sectional correlational design, which is descriptive in nature. The researcher developed a demographic questionnaire for the purpose of this study to collect data on specific information which might not have a gold standard questionnaire. Information demographics section included gender, age of participant, nationality, area of Work, type of intellectual disability (autism, Down syndrome, ADHD, or other), average hours worked per week, Job role, marital Status, number of dependents, highest level of qualification, and numbers of challenging behaviors.

Results

Table 2: Job role and burnout

JOB ROLE FINAL VERSION	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Emotional Exhaustion	4	14.00	47.00	30.7500
Depersonalization	4	5.00	23.00	12.2500
Personal Accomplishment	4	36.00	50.00	42.7500
Valid N (listwise)	4			
Manager only				
Emotional Exhaustion	6	15.00	33.00	23.3333
Depersonalization	7	5.00	23.00	9.5714
Personal Accomplishment	8	23.00	53.00	44.3750
Valid N (listwise)	5			
Frontline only				
Emotional Exhaustion	14	9.00	47.00	21.2857
Depersonalization	15	5.00	17.00	9.0667
Personal Accomplishment	15	17.00	55.00	43.0667
Valid N (listwise)	13			
Both Manager and Frontline				
Emotional Exhaustion	1	36.00	36.00	36.0000
Depersonalization	1	14.00	14.00	14.0000
Personal Accomplishment	1	32.00	32.00	32.0000
Valid N (listwise)	1			

Table 2: Test statistics for Job role and burnout

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal Accomplishment
Mann-Whitney U	31.000	44.000	58.500
Wilcoxon W	136.000	72.000	178.500
Z	-.909	-.615	-.097
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.364	.539	.922
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.397 ^b	.581 ^b	.925 ^b

H 1: There will be a significant positive correlation between Job role and Burnout: A Mann-Whitney U test revealed that Managers (mean rank on emotional exhaustion =23.3333, depersonalization=9.5714, and personal accomplishment- 44.3750), Frontline staff (mean rank on Emotional Exhaustion=21.285, depersonalization=9.0667, and personal accomplishment=43.06667) condition did not differ significantly on Emotional Exhaustion (U=31.000, p=.364), depersonalization (U= 44.000, p= .539) and personal accomplishment (U= 58.500, p=.922). However, managers appear to report a higher level of burnout on the emotional exhaustion scale with a mean score of 23.333 compared with frontline staff score of 21.285.

Table 2: Supervisory support and burnout



			Supervisor support
Kendall's tau_b	Supervisor support	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	28
	Emotional Exhaustion	Correlation Coefficient	-.207
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.169
		N	24
	Depersonalisation	Correlation Coefficient	-.393**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
		N	26
	Personal Accomplishment	Correlation Coefficient	.369*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.010
		N	27

H 2: Supervisory support will correlate negatively with burnout: A Kendall's tau b correlation found no significant association between supervisory support and emotional exhaustion (tau b (28) = 0.05, $p = .169$). However, a Kendall's tau b positive correlation was found between depersonalization (tau b (26) = 0.05, $p = .008$) and personal accomplishment (tau b (27) = 0.05, $p = 0.10$)

Discussions

The three job roles examined in this present study were frontline staff, who work directly and on a one-to-one basis with individuals with intellectual disabilities; managers, who are responsible for oversight, coordination, and staff supervision; and a third group consisting of professionals who serve in a dual capacity as both managers and frontline caregivers. The rationale for including these three categories was to explore whether differences in job function and responsibility influenced susceptibility to burnout. Caregiving roles are often associated with emotional intensity and high demands, and it was important to determine whether the position occupied within an organizational hierarchy had any predictive value for burnout levels.

Interestingly, the study found no significant association between job role and burnout. This suggests that whether a caregiver worked as frontline staff, as a manager, or in a combined role did not in itself determine their likelihood of experiencing burnout. This finding contrasts with some earlier studies that have suggested managerial roles may buffer against stress due to increased autonomy, while frontline roles carry heavier emotional strain. In this study, however, burnout was not statistically predicted by job role, although descriptive statistics did reveal some nuances.

Specifically, the descriptive mean scores indicated that managers reported slightly higher levels



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of emotional exhaustion compared to frontline staff. This is noteworthy because one might expect managers, with more control and authority, to be less vulnerable to burnout than frontline caregivers who work directly with service users in demanding environments. Instead, the results suggest that managers may face unique stressors of their own. These could include the burden of organizational responsibilities, administrative pressures, conflict resolution, and the dual task of supporting staff while also ensuring high-quality service provision under resource constraints. Despite these observed differences in mean scores, the overall analysis confirmed that job role was not a significant predictor of burnout in this sample.

Another interesting outcome of the study relates to educational qualification. Over 55% of the participants held an undergraduate degree, and an additional 29% possessed a master's degree. One might expect higher educational attainment to correlate positively with feelings of personal accomplishment, as qualifications can enhance professional competence, confidence, and recognition within the workplace. Previous literature, such as the work of Skirrow and Hatton (2006), has suggested that personal accomplishment may indeed be linked to higher levels of education, as better-educated caregivers may feel more capable of fulfilling their professional responsibilities effectively. However, this study found no correlation between educational level and personal accomplishment, thereby challenging this assumption. This result implies that while qualifications may enhance theoretical knowledge or technical skills, they do not necessarily translate into greater satisfaction or a stronger sense of achievement in caregiving contexts. Personal accomplishment may therefore be more strongly influenced by factors such as interpersonal relationships, organizational culture, and the availability of resources rather than by educational attainment alone.

A central finding of this study was the role of supervisory support. The results showed that supervisory support was effective in reducing depersonalization and also in enhancing personal accomplishment among caregivers. Depersonalization, which reflects a detached or impersonal response to service users, is a core dimension of burnout, often arising when caregivers feel overwhelmed or emotionally drained. The finding that supervisory support mitigates depersonalization highlights the importance of positive workplace relationships and guidance. When caregivers feel supported, valued, and encouraged by their supervisors, they are less likely to become emotionally detached from the people they serve. Additionally, supervisory support appeared to reinforce caregivers' sense of personal accomplishment, giving them greater confidence and satisfaction in their work.

However, the study also revealed that supervisory support had no significant relationship with emotional exhaustion, which is another critical aspect of burnout characterized by chronic fatigue and depletion of emotional resources. This distinction is important because it suggests that while supportive supervisors can buffer against certain negative outcomes such as depersonalization, they may not be able to completely prevent the physical and emotional fatigue that comes from demanding workloads. Emotional exhaustion may therefore require more structural interventions, such as reduced caseloads, adequate staffing, regular breaks, and work-life balance



initiatives, rather than interpersonal support alone.

These findings emphasize that social support from supervisors plays a crucial role in minimizing certain effects of burnout, particularly depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment. Although it does not appear to shield caregivers from emotional exhaustion, supervisory support nonetheless represents a valuable organizational resource that contributes to staff well-being and service quality. The results highlight the complexity of burnout, showing that different dimensions may be influenced by different factors. This underscores the need for multifaceted strategies in addressing caregiver burnout, involving both supportive management practices and broader organizational policies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that burnout among professional caregivers cannot be directly explained by job role or educational attainment. While managers reported slightly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than frontline staff, job role was not a statistically significant predictor of burnout. Similarly, higher educational qualifications did not correspond with greater personal accomplishment, contradicting earlier assumptions in the literature. The most critical factor identified was **supervisory support**, which played a significant role in reducing depersonalization and enhancing caregivers' sense of personal accomplishment. This underscores the importance of strong, supportive leadership in caregiving organizations. However, supervisory support alone did not reduce emotional exhaustion, suggesting that organizational structures—such as workload management, adequate staffing, and time for rest—are necessary to address this aspect of burnout. The results demonstrate that caregiver burnout is a **multifaceted phenomenon** influenced more by interpersonal and organizational support than by job role or qualifications. This study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the need for holistic approaches in managing caregiver well-being, particularly within intellectual disability services.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Supervisory Support Systems:** Develop structured mentoring and feedback programs where managers actively support frontline staff through encouragement, regular check-ins, and open communication channels.
2. **Promote Organizational Resources for Well-being:** Beyond social support, organizations should implement policies such as manageable caseloads, flexible scheduling, adequate staffing, and mandatory rest breaks to directly address emotional exhaustion.
3. **Training for Supervisors and Managers:** Leadership training should emphasize empathy, active listening, conflict resolution, and strategies to recognize early signs of burnout among staff.



4. **Encourage Collaborative Decision-Making:** Involve caregivers at all levels in policy and decision-making processes to reduce feelings of powerlessness and increase job satisfaction.
5. **Continuous Professional Development:** Offer ongoing training and career progression opportunities that go beyond academic qualifications to enhance practical skills, confidence, and personal accomplishment.
6. **Future Research Directions:** Larger and more diverse caregiver populations should be studied to validate these findings and explore how individual personality traits interact with supervisory support in predicting burnout.

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