

A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEAR OF SUCCESS AND BURNOUT AMONG WORKING WOMEN IN IRANIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Mohammad Hossein Motaghi-Pishe
School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 USM Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
e-mail: motaghi@usm.my

ABSTRACT

Fear of success is derived from lack of trust and confidence in one's own personality. To be in doubt of one's self and to be anxious about other's expectations, exists constantly in the thought and behavior of working women. This, on its own, is a great source of anxiety and sets the foundation of continuous job stress. Burnout is a response to chronic job stress. It is a gradual erosion and feeling of failure, and being worn out. This paper aims to investigate the relationship between fear of success and burnout among working women in Iranian public schools. Moreover, it examines whether fear of success and burnout are related to some demographic characteristics such as age, years of service, marital status, academic background and organizational rank. The results reveal that fear of success and burnout in women working in public schools are correlated; but there are no significant differences in levels of fear of success and/or burnout relative to demographic factors.

Keywords: fear of success, burnout, chronic job stress, feeling of failure

INTRODUCTION

The development level of communities in different countries shows that women are increasingly taking part in economic development; but despite having the necessary knowledge and experience to contribute, confusion of gender roles in different stages has not made their socialization and promotion easier. In today's traditional families that follow the working rules by gender, bias suppositions are imposed upon women, and therefore, suppress their potential abilities.

Women are forced to cope with an existing situation by environmental factors. This process unconsciously affects their way of life and relations with others and its outcomes pave the way for their future (Motaghi, Mosapor, & Arjomand, 2004). Despite the fact that women are encouraged to be successful throughout their educational years, when aiming for the highest achievements at work, they are confronted by obstacles that cause despair (Korman, 2004). Fear of success is a mental pattern by which the individual thinks of different changes that may

occur afterwards and that he/she may have to cope with (Rao, 2004). In numerous situations, people claim to want success but distance themselves from it by slacking and refraining from actions that lead to success because they feel undeserving. This is called fear of success (Bagget, 2000). This fear is caused due to lack of self confidence to attain one's goals (Brooks, 2005). Fear of success is mainly observed in women who have a high desire for success. Among women with fewer capabilities and a lessened desire for success, there are fewer attempts at success (Farahani, 1999).

Maslow, in explaining unwillingness in some individuals in reaching their potential abilities, called it "the fear of one's own greatness" or "the running away from one's own best talent" (Belss, 1998). Occasionally, fighting success and thinking that it is fearsome, surface unconsciously. Sometimes, an individual's past makes him/her shy away from success (such as past defeats which are rooted deep inside the individual). There are times that an individual has the ability to succeed, but the changes that ensue make him/her anxious (August, 2000). Karabenick and Marshall believe that Horner's initial thoughts of such fears revolve around competition in the workforce, especially if it takes place among men (Tavasolly Rodsary, 2000).

If an individual thinks that he/she is not able to compete with others, he/she senses defeat and fears his/her own incompetence in competition (Brooks, 2005). Some studies demonstrate that some women think that success and womanhood are incompatible and this is the reason behind their fear. Another reason is the belief that success is accompanied by aggressiveness, which is in contradiction to women's characteristics. Therefore, rewards of success in women may cause anxiety (Hide, 2001). Women mainly fear success because the idea of possessing enough power to construct their lives to their own preferences will diminish their likeability. Success has threatened their current lives and created a situation in which they are unsure of how to behave (Marano, 2004). More often than not, fear of success is accompanied by a lack of confidence and self-respect, and individuals with these characteristics often turn out to be what others expect them to be. These individuals modify their behavior based on the needs and desires of others, in order to obtain their satisfaction. Therefore, anxiousness is an indispensable part of their lives and the feeling of helplessness makes them reliant on others (Motaghi et al., 2004).

According to Horner, fear of success emanates from the contradiction which exists in women's educational system (Moghadamipor, 2000). She believes that fear of success is a personality structure which is a preventive factor in women's progress (Abdy, 2000). This is the cause of stress which binds women's ambitions and progresses.

In fact, hesitation of self-acceptance and anxiousness for others' expectations exist constantly in working women's thoughts and behaviors; which by themselves are a great source of anxiety in working women, and a facilitator of constant job stress. Perpetual job stress causes burnout, which has negative mental, physical and organizational outcomes. Burnout has been emphasized in discussions related to job stress, and is usually the outcome of prolonged job stress.

A consequence of job stress is a general feeling of burnout, which is created when an individual undergoes extended stress, pressure and an insufficient source of satisfaction.

The term 'burnout' was applied initially by Freudenberger to refer to "the psychological state of workers at an alternative health care agency and gave the definition of an idealistic overachiever fatigued and/or frustrated" (Babcock III, 2003). Originally, he used the term to describe emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from work conditions. He defined burnout as the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one's devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results (Freudenberger, 1974).

The definitions and characterizations of burnout have transitioned over the years. Perhaps the most widely adopted definition comes from Maslach (1982), who states that a hallmark of burnout is a shift in the view of others, from positive and caring perspectives to negative and uncaring ones. In any individual suffering from burnout, a change in attitude and behavior will occur. It gradually prevails throughout the organization and places the individual in a situation in which emancipation from it proves to be difficult. Potter (1998) states that none of the organization's workforce is exempted, and everyone, regardless of organizational level, is susceptible to burnout. Burnout has been found to be prevalent among human service professionals, such as nurses, teachers, social workers and mental health professionals. Due to the nature of their work, they are at considerably high risk for burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). Burnout is a risk factor for personal dysfunction and negative work-related attitudes. The negative work-related attitudes include the feeling that one has nothing left to offer to one's work, judging patients (students, offenders, or clients) as undeserving of their efforts and thinking that one's professional accomplishments are inadequate to one's expectations, leading to a negative evaluation of one's job performance (Barnett, Brennan, & Gareis, 1999). Brunt (2003) believes that women are more prone to burnout because they tend to carry out various roles simultaneously, for example as wife, mother, woman and employee. Furthermore, the conflict of job and family is more prevalent among women, causing more stress than in men; and therefore, heightening the probability of succumbing to burnout (Mahdad, 2005).

Working women in public schools sometimes seem reluctant to take part in meetings with parents of students to discuss the difficulties that students encounter in relation to their learning activities. They seem somehow indifferent to their students' difficulties. Furthermore, in promotion meetings, school boards report no enthusiasm on the part of the individuals. Reports show that they prefer to work at their current position.

Therefore, fear of success and burnout in working women could be related. Fear of success as an obstacle in career development culminates in anxiety, stagnation, and loss of motivation and stress; all of which possibly play major roles in creating and developing burnout. Why does it matter if fear of success is related to burnout among working women in Iranian public schools? The answer to this question is readily apparent. First, identifying this link broadens the application of existing research to a new cultural paradigm. Such information in addition to the elevation of organizational learning will assist management strategists in developing strategies and incentive structures that effectively motivate Iranian workers as well as provide the foundation for explorations of regional and ethnic differences in employees' dispositions and attitudes in Iran. Second, this study offers a new dimension to consider when analyzing gender differences in career opportunities. In order to arrive at this subject, this article poses the following question, which has been implemented based on a field study: Is there a correlation between fear of success and burnout among women working in schools?

METHOD

In this research, the descriptive method (from the kind of correlation) is used. The statistical population of this research includes working women from a total of 1990 persons from public schools of Sirjan Township from the province of Kerman, Iran. The population comprises sample groups from elementary, middle and high school levels with academic backgrounds of high school diploma (600 persons), associate degree (650 persons), bachelor's degree (732 persons) and master's degree (8 persons). Positions held by the sample group consist of principals, assistant principals, teachers and clerks, from whom a sample of 204 was drawn, with the usage of Kokran's formula. Considering the fact that the statistical population was not homogenous, stratified sampling was employed.

Data gathering instruments were two closed questionnaires. A: Potter's burnout questionnaire. B: Zukerman and Allison's fear of success questionnaire. Potter's burnout questionnaire was chosen to measure burnout because the researcher neither had access to the Maslach burnout inventory human services survey (MBI-HSS) nor to the educators survey (MBI-ES).

The validity and reliability of these instruments were obtained: 0.90, 0.89, 0.92 and 0.85, respectively.

Data on the demographic characteristics of respondents was gathered via a demographic questionnaire developed by the researcher. Characteristics addressed by the questionnaire were: (a) age, (b) marital status, (c) years of service, (d) academic background, and (e) organizational rank.

Frequency percentiles were presented in tables. Differences between married and single were tested for significance using t-test or its non-parametric equivalent, Mann-Whitney test, for continuous variables and chi-squared tests were used for categorical variables. Mean of data sets were examined by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by appropriate Post hoc testing for multiple comparisons; as performing parametric test were not allowed, Kruskal-Wallis test were substituted. Overall relative validity was investigated by assessing Spearman's correlation coefficient. A *P*-value less than 0.05 were considered significant. Statistical calculations were done by SPSS 13.

FINDINGS

Data analysis illustrated that fear of success was significantly related to burnout in women working in schools, but these two variables were not related to marital status, academic background, years of service, age or organizational rank of respondents (Figure 1).

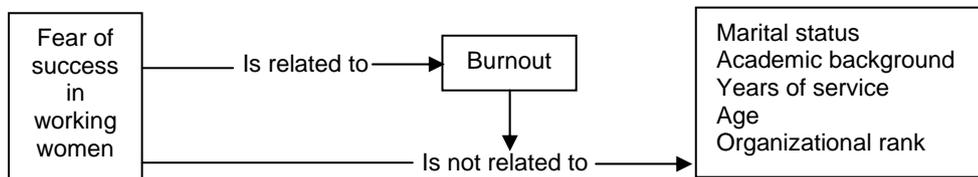


Figure 1. Relationship of variables

Explanation of variables is as follows:

1. The fear of success variable was obtained as a result of the summation of scores of questions in fear of success questionnaire and dividing the scores into two ranks: low (27–102) and high (103–184). Low fear of success among 103 respondents (50.5%) and high fear of success among 101 respondents (49.5%) were confirmed.

2. The burnout variable was obtained as a result of the summation of scores of questions in the burnout questionnaire and the division of scores into three ranks: low (48–168), medium (169–312) and high (313–432). Low burnout among 174 respondents (85.3%) and medium burnout among 30 respondents (14.7%) were confirmed. Respondents did not give high scores to this variable.
3. In order to investigate the relationship between fear of success and burnout among women working in schools, initially the contingency table Pearson Chi-Square statistic was utilized by preparing a contingency table for every respondent, their fear of success and burnout levels were determined accordingly. Analysis of data revealed that fear of success in women working in school was related to their burnout.

The value of Pearson Chi-Square statistic was indicative of positive correlation of these variables. Since the degree of freedom was equal to one, square statistic Yates correction was used and correlation of fear of success and burnout was confirmed (Table 1).

Table 1
Contingency table and Pearson Chi-square statistic and Chi-square statistic Yates correlation

| Variable | Fear of success | | | | Pearson Chi-square statistic | Df | Sig | Chi-square statistic Yates correlation | Sig |
|----------|-----------------|-----|------|-------|------------------------------------|----|-------|---|-------|
| | Rank | Low | High | Total | | | | | |
| Burnout | Low | 95 | 79 | 174 | 7.986 | 1 | 0.005 | 6.907 | 0.009 |
| | Medium | 8 | 22 | 30 | | | | | |
| | Total | 103 | 101 | 204 | | | | | |

4. Comparison of burnout distributions based on marital status of respondents was conducted by the use of Mann-Whitney test, which illustrated that burnout distribution (measures of location and dispersion) among the respondents were identical. Although, mean rank of burnout scores in the married group was higher than the single one (102.2 vs. 100.7, respectively), the observed difference was not due to the effect of marital status on burnout; rather it was the result of sampling error, P-value = 0.857 (Table 2).

Table 2
Mann-Whitney for comparison of burnout distribution in married and single respondents

| Burnout | | No. of respondents | Mean rank | Mann- Whitney | Wilkakson W-statistic | Z-statistic | Sig |
|-------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------|
| | | | | U-Statistic | | | |
| Marital status | Single | 23 | 100.74 | 2041.000 | 2317.000 | -0.180 | 0.857 |
| | Married | 180 | 102.16 | | | | |
| | Total | 203 | | | | | |

5. Comparison of fear of success distributions based on marital status of respondents illustrated that their fear of success distributions (measures of location and dispersion) were the same. The mean rank of fear of success scores in the single group was higher than the married one (109.4 vs. 101.1, respectively). This observed difference was not due to the effect of marital status on fear of success; rather, it was the result of sampling error (P-value = 0.46). Among other methods, a median test was utilized to confirm results and the equality of medians was accepted (Table 3).
6. Comparison of burnout distributions in different categories of academic background, years of service and age were conducted by the use of non parametric test of ANOVA, Kruskal-Wallis test. The results revealed that distribution (measure of location and dispersion) of burnout in the above-mentioned categories were the same. The scores of mean rank of burnout in different categories showed a slight difference; which was not due to the effect of academic background, years of service or age on burnout; rather it was due to a sampling error (Table 4).
7. Comparison of fear of success distributions in different categories of academic background, years of service and age were conducted by using the Kruskal-Wallis test. The results showed that distributions (measures of location and dispersion) of fear of success in different categories were the same. However, the scores of mean rank of fear of success in different categories showed a slight difference; this difference was not due to the effect of academic background, years of service or age on fear of success; rather, it was due to a sampling error. A median test, among other methods, was employed to reconfirm the results and the equality of medians was accepted (Table 5).
8. Comparison of burnout distributions in different ranks of education and administration were conducted by using the Mann-Whitney test and the results demonstrated that the distribution (measures of location & dispersion) of burnout in different ranks of education and administration were equal. However, the scores of mean rank of burnout in different ranks showed a slight difference; this was due to a sampling error and was not due to the effect of different ranks on burnout (Table 6).
9. Comparison of fear of success distributions in different ranks of education and administration were conducted by using the Mann-Whitney tests. The results illustrated that distribution (measures of location and dispersion) of fear of success in different ranks were equal. Although the scores of mean rank of fear of success in different ranks showed a slight difference, this difference was due to sampling error and not due to the effect of different ranks on fear of success (Table 7).

Table 6
Mann-Whitney statistic for comparison of burnout distribution in different ranks of education and administration

| Burnout | Ranks | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|
| | Educational | Administrative | Total |
| No. of respondents | 165 | 34 | 199 |
| Mean rank | 100.08 | 99.36 | – |
| Mann-Whitney u-statistic | | 2792.500 | |
| Wilkakson W-statistic | | 3387.500 | |
| Z-statistic | | –0.066 | |
| Sig | | 0.947 | |

Table 7
Mann-Whitney statistic for comparison of fear of success distribution and Chi-Square statistic for comparison of fear of success median in educational and administrative ranks

| Burnout | Ranks | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|
| | Educational | Administrative | Total |
| No. of respondents | 165 | 34 | 199 |
| Mean rank | 100.45 | 97.82 | – |
| Mann-Whitney u-statistic | | 2731.000 | |
| Wilkakson W-statistic | | 3326.000 | |
| Z-statistic | | –0.279 | |
| Sig | | 0.780 | |
| Chi-square statistic for median test | | 0.779 | |
| Sig | | 0.078 | |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study illustrate that the fear of success and burnout in women working in public schools are correlated. Women generally possess a traditional viewpoint regarding success. They believe that this is a man's world; therefore, fear of success is nurtured within them. In the statistical population of this study, the ratios of high and low fear of success are equally distributed. This is perhaps due to the fact that schools are segregated and the working environment is entirely female dominated. Therefore, women do not need to compete with men to acquire a job or to maintain one. In this situation, almost all the positions are occupied by women. Furthermore, the majority of working women in the statistical population were teachers (0.83%) who were teaching at different levels and there existed no competition among them. Therefore, Horner's initial thoughts based on the existence of competition with men, do not exist. On the other hand, the degree of family traditionalism is a determinant factor in women's fear of success. According to Horner, women, with regards to their motives of escape from success (fear of success), are confronted with psychological

obstacles such as fear of social rejection, loss of femininity and denial of success (Motaghi et al., 2004).

Therefore, the existence of fear of success as a psychological structure in a group of working women is not far from expectations. Individuals who fear rejection, because of the psychological agony it causes, prefer not to even contemplate success. Fear of rejection causes the individual not to express feelings, wants and desires, since the least amount of inattentiveness and disregard will be considered a mental stroke and can destroy self-esteem and values. The individual may become anxious of provoking the dislike and/or anger of others, thus escaping from any form of success. Fear of success causes psychological distress, by which the individual feels tired and stifled, but is unaware of the reasons. While in fact, the reason is the psychological feelings of rejection by people, whom she believes are not accepting of her success and envy her. This fear confines the individual's life and brings about a sense of exhaustion and burnout. This sense of burnout has negative psychological, physiological and organizational outcomes, which may lead to a change of jobs or a career change altogether.

It should be mentioned that in this study, fear of success was not related to demographic characteristics. It was found that there was not a significant difference in levels of fear of success relative to factors, such as years of service, age, marital status, academic background or organizational ranks of respondents. Motaghi et al. (2004) believe that each human being is not just an individual, but more or less, a creature of patterns and attitudes that have developed throughout transitions in the cultural history of the society, making human beings part of a cultural structure. In other words, the prevailing culture of a society creates such profound beliefs, expectations and attitudes that the experience of marital life, maturity that comes with aging, knowledge of academic study and years of services in the organization have not been able to alter it.

With respect to burnout in the statistical population of this study, it should be mentioned that working in an educational environment is an excellent condition for women in this society. The prevalent culture considers it a suitable career choice, with non-materialistic rewards for women in this society.

In these circumstances, an individual possesses eagerness and motivation to work; therefore, perplexity of work overload is no more than the individual's tolerance. Furthermore, civil social relations are created and there no longer exists a conflict of interest between individual and work values. As a result, the individual's belief of the worth of their work is not negatively influenced, creating a suitable match between the individual and the job environment.

Burnout is a multidimensional phenomenon that is seen, to some extent, as exclusive to jobs that entail increased contact with others. The nature of these jobs necessitates one-sided social relations in which the individual has no control and feels vain and futile. While in the teaching profession of the investigated society, dominated by a teacher-centered teaching method, teachers are considered to be trustworthy and reliable by students, and relevant decisions are made by the teachers. In such situations, teachers communicate with and are in contact with all their students. Therefore, the feeling of lack of communication does not exist and situations are controlled by teachers. This is contrary to Litter and Maslach's beliefs that teachers are the first candidates of burnout (Wiseman, 2004). In a teacher-centered teaching method, teachers have a preplanned schedule and therefore, do not get over-involved in work. The educational goal is achieved when students have studied the preplanned schedule, and teachers consider their work satisfactory and conducted in the correct manner. Furthermore, the working capacity of a teacher with regards to her level of teaching is defined, and her responsibilities are, thereby, determined. It is for the reasons above that the causes of burnout fade. Malugani (2005) believes that people, whose work capacity is defined but have increased responsibilities, are caught in a state of being affected by burnout. In the statistical population of this study, it is possible that the capacity of individuals is enough to satisfy their needs and responsibilities; this is because in teacher-centered learning environments, the goal of both sides is to simply pass the exams.

Since different students have different learning abilities, in a teacher-centered learning environment it is possible that work is not considered simple and redundant and adequate job satisfaction exists. In such a situation, job under load, ambiguity and/or conflict, which set the foundation for burnout, do not take place. Based on this, a low level of burnout in 85.3% of working women of the statistical population is not far from expectation. It is noteworthy that burnout in women working in schools is not related to the demographic characteristics, such as marital status, academic background, years in service, age and/or organizational ranks. This, however, does not apply to other studies that have reported more burnout among people with higher academic qualifications with ages of 30–40. These studies illustrated that 62% of the active population, whose age is 24–34, experienced more job stress as a result of the difference between actual work expectations and individual ones (Brunt, 2003). Jackson (1993) found significant differences in levels of burnout relative to such factors as age, marital status, academic rank and etc., among pharmacy school members.

In an Islamic society, education has an important value, and this has been stated in the first chapter of the Quran (the holy book of Islam) where human beings are encouraged to "read" (Nejati, 1990). Therefore, it is most likely that the statistical population of this study formed their expectations of their work environment

based on their religious beliefs regarding education. This entails that the educational environment is not considered stressful, even among employees of the administrative departments (17%).

REFERENCES

- Abdy, B. (2000). *A study of the relationship between gender roles, job identity and fear of success in engineering students*. Unpublished thesis, Teacher Training University, Tehran, Iran.
- August, M. (2000). *Overcoming fears of financial success*. Retrieved 15 March 2004, from <http://www.planetlightworker.com/articles/marilynaugust/article3.htm/>
- Babcock III, J. H. (2003). *Burnout among licensed master's level social workers in Maine*. Retrieved 2 May 2004, from <http://www.usm.maine.edu/~swo/babcock3doc/>
- Bagget, B. (2000). *How to overcome the fear of success*. Retrieved 20 February 2004, from <http://www.handwrgtinguniversity.com/newsletterssamples/fear-of-success/>
- Barnett, R. C., Brennan, R. T., & Gareis, K. C. (1999). *A closer look at the measurement of burnout*. Retrieved 10 September 2003, from <http://www.bellpub.com/jabr/1999/th990201.pdf/>
- Belss, A. (1998). *Psychology of laziness*. (Gharachedaghy, M., trans.). Tehran. (Original work published 1991).
- Brooks, T. (2005). *Understanding the fear of success*. Retrieved 5 February 2006, from <http://www.black-collegian-com/news/fearofsuccess507.5html/>
- Brunt, G. (2003). *Burnout*. Retrieved 12 August 2004, from <http://www.corporatetraining.co.za/news3.htm/>
- Farahani, M. (1999). *Psychology of personality*. Tehran, Iran: Teacher Training University.
- Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). Staff burnout. *Journal of Social Issues*, 30, 159–165.
- Hide, J. (2001). *Psychology of women*. (Rahmaty, B., trans.). Tehran: Jihon Publication. (Original work published 1998).
- Jackson, R. A. (1993). An analysis of burnout among school of pharmacy faculty. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 57(1), 9–17.
- Korman, A. K. (2004). *Industrial and organizational psychology*. (Shokrkon, H., trans.). Tehran: Roshd. (Original work published 1971).
- Mahdad, Ali. (2005). *Industrial and organizational psychology* (3rd ed.). Tehran: Jangal Publishing.
- Malugani, M. (2005). *Battling burnout, health professionals are at high risk*. Retrieved 9 February 2006, from <http://www.medsearch.com/print?article=articles/burnout/index.asp/>
- Marano, H. (2004). *Fear of success*. Retrieved 5 February 2006, from <http://cms.psychologyday.com/articles/index.php?Term=PTO-20031224-0.00001.xml/>
- Maslach, C. (1982). *Burnout – The cost of caring*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1982). Burnout in health professions: A social psychological analysis. In G. S. Sanders, & J. Suls (eds.). *Social psychology of health and illness* (3rd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 227–251.
- Moghadamipor, M. (2000). *Psychology of Work*. Tehran, Iran: Arasbaran Publication.

- Motaghi, M. H., Mosapor, N., & Arjomand, S. H. (2004). Reasons related to fear of success in working women. *Women Studies*, 5, 40–63.
- Nejati, M. D. (1990). *Quran and psychology*. (Arab, A. Mashad, trans.). Iran: Foundation of Islamic Research Publishing. (Original work published 1987).
- Potter, B. (1998). *Overcoming job burnout: How to renew enthusiasm for work* (2nd ed.). (Retitled). Oakland, CA: Roning Publishing.
- Rao, V. (2004). *Which type of fear might be holding you back from success in business?* Retrieved 5 February 2006, from <http://r144.com/hbnorticle036.htm/>
- Tavasolly Rodsary, N. (2000). *A study of the relationship between fear of success and anxiety of exam*. Unpublished thesis. Tehran, Iran: Teacher Training University.
- Wiseman, R. (2004). *Beyond burnout*. Retrieved 9 February 2006, from <http://www.christianity.ca/faith/christian-living/2003/11.004.html/>