

Sorting Out Psychological Causes of Students Academic Burnout in Higher Education

Xueting Ding

Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, 43400, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Recently, a number of scholars have begun to investigate the problem of academic burnout among college students in more depth. Based on the above studies and traditional ideas, the primary causes of student burnout are as follows. Burnout is thus thought to be a result of the interaction among multiple risk factors rather than a single lack. Academic stress, anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, low self-efficacy, poor self-regulation, weak coping strategies, and lack of social support are all associated with burnout, and heavy workloads and uncertain future prospects can further exacerbate these factors. The two types of causes in this paper are direct psychological causes and mediating and moderating mechanisms; therefore, it has been found that stress leads to anxiety; anxiety further increases exhaustion; and self-efficacy and support can reduce both of these negative impacts. Therefore, this study presents an organised list of the causes of burnout to inform support services for students.

KEYWORDS

Academic burnout; Higher education; Academic stress; Self-efficacy; Anxiety; Social support; Perfectionism.

1. INTRODUCTION

As students have been dealing with a large number of courses, competition for grades, uncertainty about employment after graduation, and continuous online interaction in college, their stress has been rising. Burnout is not fatigue; rather, it is a continuous state of low spirits that leaves students feeling tired and unmotivated for study, causing them anxiety about their studies. Burnout will damage the students' studies [12], cause a mental illness, and prevent them from learning normally.

The psychological causes of academic burnout are often mentioned in isolation. Some studies have pointed out stress and work pressure; others have focused on anxiety; some have cited a lack of self-efficacy and weak support systems. A good account should connect these threads and show how they are related. Therefore, the three types of psychological causes of academic burnout among university students that this paper will explore are: core risks, mediating processes and protective factors.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR BURNOUT CAUSATION

2.1. Burnout as a Stress-response Process

Burnout generally refers to a state resulting from prolonged stress. Higher education involves frequent deadlines, evaluations, performance comparisons, and role conflicts; thus, students' emotional and cognitive reserves are depleted. A recent large-scale study of Chinese college students found a high proportion of academic burnout and identified stress-related factors as the main causes of this problem

[1]. Recently, some studies have also found that academic stress is directly related to burnout and anxiety, making it one of the more obvious near-cause [2].

Stress-response mode of burnout will help us understand the accumulation of such issues. Students are not generally exhausted from a single difficult exam, but rather have been constantly stressed by various demanding situations that exceed their ability to cope. If the stress is prolonged, a person will have used up their mental strength and may no longer be able to face daily problems normally.

2.2. Cognitive and Motivational Resources

The second is a theory of cognitive and motivational resources. Based on social cognitive theory, students' self-efficacy is their sense of ability in life at school; therefore, it affects how they deal with academic problems and whether they are willing to continue studying despite facing difficulties. Based on studies of Chinese adolescents and college students, academic self-efficacy can reduce the impact of stress on burnout and inhibit the route from anxiety to exhaustion [2, 3]. When self-efficacy is low, the same amount of work is more likely to be perceived as too difficult, and small failures are more easily viewed as evidence of failure.

Reasons and goals. Students with harmonious interests in learning are less likely to be overworked and thus face the problem of burnout. Research on student burnout has identified some protective factors for students, such as vitality, resilience, academic self-efficacy and positive engagement; at the same time, a lack of motivation and self-regulation are correlated with an increased risk of burnout [4, 11]. Thus, burnout may stem from external pressures and is also related to the students' inner meanings of studying.

3. CORE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES OF ACADEMIC BURNOUT

3.1. Academic Stress

The primary reason for the psychological state of burnout is academic stress. Students believe that the current resources cannot meet the high demands of their studies. High course loads, frequent tests, vague goals and high-pressure competition are all contributing to this. Studies have consistently shown that higher academic pressure is related to more burnout in students' groups [1,2]. Due to the impact of the pandemic and its aftermath, people's lives have become more unpredictable and stressful at present [5].

The results of stress are not the same for all students. The Scope of its application is not clear. Stress is a general cause of these problems, and thus will also lead to emotional exhaustion, sleep disorders, reduced concentration, and withdrawal from school activities. Therefore, any study of burnout in higher education must start with an assessment of the structure and pressure of academic life.

3.2. Academic Anxiety

Another reason for the stress of burnout is school-related anxiety. Research on Chinese students has shown that anxiety partially mediates the link between academic stress and academic burnout [2]. Stress is thus likely to make students anxious and fearful of failing, so they will pay excessive attention to their studies. Anxiety then draws a person's attention away from studying and makes them more exhausted; those who lack confidence will be especially affected.

Anxiety will damage students' lives at school. A hard-to-solve problem may be seen by one student as a good challenge, but by another, it will be an expression of inadequacy. The anxious student is more likely to avoid the task, put it off, or think of disaster unnecessarily. Over time, these patterns lead to a sense of being trapped in academic life and thus become the symptoms of burnout.

3.3. Low Self-efficacy

The first is a reduction in a person's self-efficacy and control. Students who doubt their own abilities are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the demands of study and thus avoid active participation in learning. According to the above research, a strong sense of academic self-efficacy is negatively correlated with burnout and reduces the negative impact of stress and anxiety [2-4]. Self-efficacy will thus determine whether a student finds a difficult term to be manageable or terrifying.

Low self-efficacy can also be self-reinforcing. When students expect to fail, they are less willing to take part in class, put off their studies, and see normal difficulties as a sign of their own deficiency. These behaviours reduce performance and are thus perceived as evidence of failure. Such a cycle will be even more prominent in the high-pressure environment of competitive higher education.

3.4. Maladaptive Perfectionism and Overcontrol

The other is poor-adapting perfectionism. Students who have unreasonably high, inflexible or overly self-critical expectations will be continuously unhappy with their results. Although the demand for excellence encourages people to strive more, perfectionism is also negative in that one believes any error is unforgivable and thus ties self-worth to achieving perfection. Recently, burnout research has indicated that perfectionistic traits are associated with exhaustion and a lack of motivation under a high-pressure evaluation system [4, 7].

The two kinds of perfectionism-induced burnout are shown below. First, it instills in all the responsibilities of work. Second, it does not provide a sense of achievement for the students after they succeed. Therefore, they will always feel this pressure. As the assessment and ranking work in higher education are routine, perfectionistic students may appear to have good academic results but are internally struggling emotionally.

3.5. Poor Coping and Weak Self-regulation

Burnout is also associated with poor coping abilities and weak self-regulation. Students who cope with stress by avoidance, rumination, emotional suppression or all-or-nothing thinking are more at risk than those who use planning, reappraisal or help-seeking. According to a recent study, among all reasons for students' burnout, poor self-regulation and unhealthy coping mechanisms are relatively frequent [4].

Self-regulation is needed for studying in school because attention and time management are required. When students cannot manage their study and are distracted, they will feel stressed. Bad sleeping habits, excessive screen time, and an inability to distinguish between study and rest are all negative. Thus, burnout is not just due to high work pressure; it may also indicate that the student has lost their capacity for endurance.

4. MEDIATING AND MODERATING MECHANISMS

4.1. Social Support

Social support helps people face the problems of overwork. University students who feel better supported by peers, family and teachers are generally less burnt out and live better [6]. Support will not reduce the stress, but it may change the way one feels the stress. A student who can express their problems, receive support or help from others, etc., is less likely to see these issues as a personal failing.

Reduce loneliness through the support mentioned above. Burnout will occur if students are unable to manage all the demands themselves. Under the pressure of intense study at the top of school, people

may feel isolated or helpless about their difficulties. Therefore, the social environment at the university is also psychologically meaningful and may be one of the reasons for burnout.

4.2. Emotional Regulation

Emotional Regulation is also one of the reasons for burnout. Students have different capacities for problem-reframing and recovery from failure, and some are more likely to feel depressed after failure. Recently, some studies have shown that emotions are related to self-efficacy in protecting students from burnout [3, 8]. When students cannot control their anxiety and disappointment, each problem feels more severe and their energy is exhausted quickly.

This is to say that the two students had the same amount of work but were at different risks of burnout. The one who can manage emotions better will not be stressed out, but the other will be anxious and tired. Emotional regulation thus serves to reduce the impact of external stress on the individual.

4.3. Psychological Distress and Comorbidity

Often, burnout is accompanied by other serious mental and physical illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, various diseases of the body, a loss of interest in life, etc. Burnout and depression are not the same, but they can be similar in that both involve feelings of fatigue, detachment and ineffectiveness [4-5]. Distress will lead to or worsen the problems caused by burnout. For example, students who are chronically sad or anxious will have difficulty concentrating on their studies and may feel that studying is a burden.

The two will not be treated as separate matters and may be connected. It is also a problem of mental health, and the psychological reasons often accumulate with other kinds of stress. Prevention, therefore, needs to pay attention to the whole of students' emotions, not just their grades or academic workload.

5. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE

Although this paper will focus on psychological reasons, these reasons are also influenced by the institutional environment. High expectations from above, high-pressure learning environments, lack of timely feedback, etc. Recent studies on higher education burnout during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have found that financial insecurity, social isolation and fatigue from online learning have all increased the risks of burnout [5, 9]. Therefore, this psychological weakness is more pronounced because of repeated exposure to the triggering environment.

The Institution's Setting is also a reason for non-operational protection funds. Supportive teaching can alleviate a student's sense of anxiety; at the same time, communication with the student and establishing reasonable self-discipline regulations are also suitable. At the same time, an overly abstract and harsh academic atmosphere may make students anxious and too anxious about doing well. Therefore, the psychological causes need to be considered in the context of the educational environment that supports them.

Resilience is also not an option. It is often considered an all-purpose support, but resilience is not simply something that students are either born with or lack. Recent intervention-oriented studies have shown that mindfulness, emotional intelligence and relaxation training can reduce burnout for certain groups of students; however, other studies have not found that resilience always buffers stress in the expected way [10]. Thus, resilience may be better viewed as a context-sensitive capacity that is affected by the quality of support and the severity of demands. Psychological prevention should therefore avoid excessive use of the language of individual toughness.

Academic culture will also be added to this. A healthy life begins when a child learns to ask for help without fearing failure and embarrassment, and giving an early education should focus more on the process of development than on end-of-study results to reduce burnout. Therefore, the prevention of burnout should not only offer counselling services after the fact but also create a supportive environment for students to learn continuously without causing excessive emotional fatigue.

Therefore, the institutional responses should be multi-faceted. To reduce the stress of grades on students, universities can be open about grades and release them at various times. Provide support for students with symptoms of high anxiety, low self-efficacy, or perfectionistic overcontrol to help address the mental health problems caused by burnout.

At the level of policy, it should be possible to identify students who are likely to be burned out earlier in the semester before they lose interest. Early identification can help address the beginning of stress and anxiety for staff sooner; otherwise, it will be difficult to maintain their motivation after they are tired.

Given the results above, the prevention of burnout measures in higher education should integrate psychological support, alterations in teaching, and realistic assessments of students' capabilities. Demand, doubt and isolation lead to burnout; enhance efficacy, support, and regulated pacing to recover.

Therefore, good prevention should be regarded as continuous educational work rather than a one-time measure, and universities need to improve their study environment so as not to exhaust the very students they aim to foster.

Based on the above analysis, a preventive framework will be established to promote early identification, provide supportive teaching, adjust the pace of evaluation, and enable students to learn self-regulation of attention and emotion to prevent exhaustion from occurring.

6. CONCLUSION

Academic burnout in higher education is caused by a cluster of interacting psychological factors rather than a single deficiency. The main reasons are academic stress, anxiety, low self-efficacy, maladaptive perfectionism, weak coping, and poor self-regulation. The above factors are often accompanied by a lack of social support and other institutional limitations that cause continuous stress for the students.

Clear Identification of the Causes of Burnout Leads to Prevention. Strengthen university counselling and support programs to build students' self-efficacy and emotional regulation abilities. At the same time, they need to be able to see that burnout is not because they are personally lacking, but rather a result of ongoing psychological stress from studying.

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