

Predicting Perceived Psychological Burnout among Sophomore Students of Covenant

¹Adekeye A. Olujide, ¹Alao A. Amos, ¹Odukoya A. Jonathan,
²Adejuwon A. Grace and ¹Solarin A. Muyiwa

¹Department of Psychology, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria

²Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract: This study explored the psychological burnout among second year students of Covenant University. Burnout as a variable has assumed a global research interest. Burnout is the consequence of stress that impacts on student's ability to profit maximally from classroom instructions and which often leads to poor academic performance. The cross-sectional study employed the descriptive survey method. There were 212 participants (123 males and 89 females) with age ranging from 15-21 years ($m = 16.8$, $SD = 1.5$) who were randomly selected from four colleges. The 15-item Maslach Burnout Inventory Student Survey (MBI-SS), a well validated scale was used for data collection. Chi-square analysis and multiple regressions were used to analyze the data. Two hypotheses were tested and result shows that a larger proportion of participants (68%) reported higher levels of burnout symptoms while a lower proportion (32%) reported a lower level of burnout symptoms. The multiple regression analysis shows that there was no significant contribution of sex ($\beta = 0.022$; $t = 0.339$; $p > 0.05$), age ($\beta = 0.023$; $t = 0.354$; $p > 0.05$) and college ($\beta = 0.045$; $t = 0.490$; $p > 0.05$) on participant's perceived psychological burnout, however, participants Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) ($\beta = 0.127$; $t = 1.963$; $p = 0.005$) was a strong predictor of participant's perceived psychological burnout. The findings were discussed with reference to the influence of academic performance as encapsulated in student's cumulative grade point average in burnout symptoms experienced by students. This study revealed a higher proportion of students reporting higher levels of burnout indicating the need for psychosocial coping skills to achieve psychological adjustment.

Key words: Burnout, sophomore students, cumulative grade point average, proportion, maximally, achieve

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Freudenberger (1974) began researching burnout during the free clinic movement and found that those involved were becoming "inoperative to all intents and purposes" due to the extreme working conditions but the most influential development in terms of scientific exploration of the burnout construct was the development of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach and Jackson, 1986), it has been used in over 90% of empirical research (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998) which makes the MBI, the most widely used research instrument to measure burnout. Burnout has been studied especially among employees in the human services and as noted by Vandenberghe and Huberman (1999), it is a crisis of overworked and disillusioned human service workers. Burnout can be described as a chronic state of exhaustion due to long-term interpersonal stress within human service professions. Academic burnout among college students refers to feeling of exhaustion because of study

demands including having a cynical and detached attitude towards one's schoolwork and feeling incompetent as a student (Zhang *et al.*, 2007).

According to Maslach (1982), the term burnout was first used to describe a syndrome of mental weariness specifically observed among human service professionals because they were involved in emotionally demanding contacts with recipients such as clients and patients. Burnout which initially was thought to affect human services workers was discovered to affect others like Managers (Lee and Ashforth, 1993), the military (Leiter *et al.*, 1994), entrepreneurs (Gryskiewicz and Buttner, 1992) and students (Schaufeli and Taris, 2005). Based on extant literature, the syndrome of student burnout is similar to that of in service employees. Student burnout can lead to higher absenteeism, lower motivation to do required course work, higher percentage dropout among others (Meier and Schmeck, 1985).

Burnout among college students refers to tiredness result from academic demands (emotional exhaustion),

having a pessimistic sense and lack of interest toward academic tasks (cynicism) and feeling of incompetency as a student (inefficacy) (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002; Zhang *et al.*, 2007). Several factors may affect the academic performance of students. Some of these factors improve academic performance and the others have detrimental effects on this academic construction. One of the most recently studied factors which affect student's academic performance is academic burnout.

Burnout is a term mostly applied in organisational setting and refers to a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that may result from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding (Maslach *et al.*, 1996). Burnout may be viewed as a syndrome that incorporates emotive breakdown and sense of depersonalization, decreased effectiveness at work and a poor evaluation of one's performance. Conceptually similar to job/work burnout, school burnout is also three dimensional consisting of exhaustion due to academic demands, pessimism and detached attitude toward one's school/studies and feelings of inadequacy/incompetency as a student (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002).

There are several stressors that facilitate student burnout, stress can be considered as "any factor, acting internally or externally which makes adaptation to environment difficult and which induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between himself and herself and the external environment" (Humphrey *et al.*, 2000). The pressure to earn good grades and to earn a degree is very high but earning a good grade is not the only source of stress for students, other sources are worry about ultimate future and inadequate recreational facilities (Joe, 1985); excessive homework, unclear assignments and uncomfortable classrooms (Hirsch and Ellis, 1996; Kohn and Frazer, 1986); performance anxiety, perfectionism, career concerns and lack of respect (Bernhard, 2005).

The experience of stress among college students is considered normal but if stress is severe and/or prolonged, it has been proven that it can reduce academic performance; interfere with a student's ability to participate in and contribute to campus life and increase the likelihood of substance abuse and other potentially damaging behaviours (Richlin and Hoe, 2003). Support for increased attention to the debilitating effects of student burnout was provided by Kitzrow (2003), who found evidence of recent increases in the number of students with severe psychological problems and in the demand for school counselling services. University education is a stressful time for many students as they go through the

process of adapting to new educational and social environments. The World Bank/UNICEF reported that education in general and university education in particular is fundamental to the construction of the knowledge economy and society in all nations. Thus, every nation of the world has accepted education as the springboard of societal development.

Studying in Nigerian universities can be potential stressful. Due to inadequate facilities for teaching and learning, the academic workload and other precursor stressors take their toll on student's academic performance that may result in psychological burnout. Ezeilo and Chukwu (1995) noted that undergraduates undergo a great deal of stress as they pass through Nigerian universities. Other researchers in Nigeria agreed that severe academic and other concomitant stresses such as financial hardship, career decisions, sexual encounters, parental expectations, university bureaucracy and challenges with interpersonal relationships are the rules rather than exceptions in Nigerian Universities (Anekwe, 1998; Ngoka, 2000; Omoluabi, 1986; Schafer, 1996). As noted by Essandoh (1995) and Mori (2000), university may be even more stressful for international students who have the added strain of learning different cultural values and language in addition to academic preparation. Based on all of these evidences, it can be rightly posited that studying in the university is inherently stressful. Other mental health challenges facing college students include anxiety and stress, depression, substance abuse, relationship management and career issues.

Pines *et al.* (1981) examined and compared burnout in nurses, counsellors, educators and undergraduate students and found that students ranked in the middle to upper levels of the burnout scale. This indicates that students have some degree of burnout during their school learning period; Meier and Schmeck (1985) corroborated this by asserting the existence or presence of burnout in college students. Recently, using a longitudinal design, Stewart *et al.* (1999) found that academic performance during medical school was negatively related to reported stress levels (i.e., anxiety and depression). Garden (1991) also found a negative relationship between burnout and perceived academic engagement of undergraduate students. Students in Nigerian universities seem to experience a lot of stress due to infrastructural deficit as they cope with academic work. The level of student's engagement in their academic activities has continued to attract the interest of researchers and education administrators. The need to understand the factors that inhibit or enhance student's academic engagement is therefore necessary especially in developing countries

where level of education is generally low. Although, burnout has been a focus of educational concern and research for decades which has resulted in various strategies to address the negative effects of burnout, fewer empirical studies have focused on perceived psychological burnout among university students. The aim of this study is therefore to explore perceived psychological burnout among second year students of Covenant University.

Research hypotheses:

- H₀₁: higher proportion of students would report higher levels of burnout symptoms
- H₀₂: there will be a relative contribution of gender, age, college and academic performance to student's burnout symptoms

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a cross-sectional survey. The descriptive survey method was adopted. There were 212 participants (123 males and 89 females) who were randomly selected from the four Colleges in Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria with age ranging from 15-21 years ($m = 16.8$, $SD = 1.5$). A stratified random sampling was employed in selecting the respondents to cater for demographic variables such as current class of respondents, gender, age and college. Participant's inclusion criteria included being students of Covenant University and being in their second year.

Measures

Maslach burnout inventory: The 15-item Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS) which is a well validated scale was used for data collection. The MBI-SS was used to assess the symptoms of psychological burnout among sophomore students of Covenant University. The participants were expected to indicate how frequently they experience each symptom by rating each item on a four-point likert like scale of Almost never, sometimes, often and almost always. The Maslach Burnout Inventory Student Survey (MBI-SS) provides scores on three scales: exhaustion was measured with five items such as I feel emotionally drained by my studies. Cynicism was measured with four items such as I have become more cynical about the potential usefulness of my studies while academic efficacy was measured with six items such as in my opinion, I am a good student. The scoring for academic efficacy are reversed scored. The scores for the 15 items are summed to yield a total score for the MBI-SS. Higher scores indicates higher levels of burnout.

Psychometric features of Maslach Burnout Inventory Student Survey (MBI-SS):

The MBI-SS possesses adequate reliability and factorial validity in Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese students (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) and for Chinese students (Ho and Schaufeli, 2009). The internal consistency of the MBI-SS was determined using the Cronbach's alpha. For the reliability estimates, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the full scale and for the three subscales. The alpha coefficient for the full scale is 0.78 while the values for the three subscales are 0.62, 0.64 and 0.88, respectively.

Procedure for data collection/analysis: The MBI-SS was administered to the participants with the aid of graduate students who are trained research assistants. The instrument was administered during general classes that bring students in a particular level together and collected on the spot. This was made possible by the assistance of course coordinators whose permission and cooperation was sought. This ensured 100% response rate. The data were expressed as both descriptive and inferential statistical methods such as frequency counts and percentages and regression analysis and a p-value of ≤ 0.05 was considered as significant. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (IBM SPSS Version 20 for Windows, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

Ethical consideration: Prior to administering the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participation was voluntary and there was no incentive given for participation. Those who agreed to participate were made to sign a consent form. Anonymity was assured by asking participants not to write their names on the questionnaire forms.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the demographic properties of the participants. More than half of the participants are males (58%) and majority are younger (63%). The College of Leadership Development Studies (CLDS) being the youngest College in Covenant University produced about a fifth (19%) of the total participants. More than half of the students are high flyers being on a 3.5 CGPA or above.

Two hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis shows that a larger proportion of participants 144 (68%) reported higher levels of burnout symptoms while a lower proportion 68 (32%) reported a lower level of burnout symptoms ($\chi^2 = 210.0$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Table 3 indicated that gender ($\beta = 0.022$; $t = 0.339$; $p > 0.05$), age ($\beta = 0.023$; $t = 0.354$; $p > 0.05$) and college of study ($\beta = 0.045$; $t = 1.490$; $p > 0.05$) did not individually predict participant's perceived psychological burnout ($F(4, 207) = 1.132$; $p > 0.05$) while participants cumulative

Tables 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 212)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Sex of participants		
Male	123	58
Female	89	42
Age of participants (mean age = 17.0 years)		
15-17	134	63
19-25	78	37
College of study		
College of Science and Technology	62	29
College of Engineering	55	26
College of Leadership Development Studies	40	19
College of Business and Social Sciences	55	26
Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)		
Equal or above 3.5	113	53
Below 3.5	99	47

Table 2: Chi-square analysis of MBI-SS symptoms (N = 212)

Higher levels of burnout symptoms	Lower levels of burnout symptoms	Total
144 (68%)	68 (32%)	212

$\chi^2 = 210.0$; $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Multiple regressions predicting psychological burnout from gender, age, college of study and Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)

Predictors	β	t-values	p-values	r	r ²	F-values	p-values
Constant	1.693	9.525	-	-	-	-	-
Gender	0.022	0.339	>0.05	0.146	0.021	1.132	>0.050
Age	0.023	0.354	>0.05	-	-	-	-
College	0.045	1.490	>0.05	-	-	-	-
CGPA	0.127	1.963	<0.05	-	-	-	-

grade point average ($\beta = 0.127$; $t = 1.963$; $p < 0.05$) was a strong predictor of participant's perceived psychological burnout. However, the predictor variable jointly accounted for about 2% of the variation in participant's perceived psychological burnout. Hypothesis 2 was partially confirmed.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that a larger percentage of students experience burnout (68%) and this confirms the hypothesis that proposes that a higher proportion of students would report higher levels of burnout. This study is consistent with findings of Lasebikan and Oyetunde (2012) and Tay *et al.* (2014) who reported higher proportion of burnout among nurses and teachers (Brouwers and Tomic, 2000). It is well documented in Nigeria that students suffer from stress and burnout due to the nature of infrastructure on campus and the pervading socio-economic situation in most families. Studies by Ezeilo and Chukwu (1995), Nweze (1985) attest to the level of stress students undergo in Nigerian universities. This study shows that only about 32% of students are able to cope with the stress, demands and pressure of academic work in Nigerian universities.

It was hypothesized that gender would significantly predict burnout among students. The finding showed no

significant gender influence on school burnout. It showed that male and female students reported similar level on school burnout. Previous research found that male and female reported comparable level of burnout (Beer and Beer, 1992). A possible reason behind this finding might be similarity in reaction to factors that precipitated school burnout. In addition, it is possible that both sexes might have had equal exposure to stressors that increased vulnerability to school burnout such as lectures assignment and examinations. As a result, their level of school burnout might be similar. In a study by the Institute of Child and Adolescent Health, it was reported that 23.4% of female high school students in China have suicidal ideation because of study stress compared to only 17% of male students, this study further justified differences in gender by reporting that in China, males are permitted to show their emotion openly whereas, female may suppress theirs. In a study by Salmela-Aro *et al.* (2008), gender was related to school burnout as more girls experienced school burnout than boys.

This study shows that CGPA was a strong predictor of burnout among students. The lower the student's academic achievement, the more burnout they experienced especially as they attempt to improve on their academic standing. This finding supports that by Salmela-Aro *et al.* (2008). They found that negative school climate, support from school, positive motivation received from teachers, gender and GPA were related to school burnout. They reported that the lower the student's GPA, the more burnout they experienced. In this study, age did not have significant influence on school burnout. The finding indicated that students reported similar level of burnout irrespective of their ages. The finding supported the research by Maslach and Leiter (1997) who found that age did not predict burnout among participants cut across different age ranges. Participants in this study are second year students and might have developed a similar pattern of coping with stress. In a study by Bernhard (2010) while statistically significant differences were not observed between graduate and undergraduate students, it was interesting to note that graduate students continued to average lower levels of burnout and this may be due to greater program and elective flexibility in comparison to undergraduate curricula that tend to be more tightly structured by government and accreditation agencies. This lends credence to the level of burnout experienced by university students.

CONCLUSION

Although, these results should be interpreted with caution (data were self-reported by 212 sophomore university students), the findings may be useful to those

responsible for planning for university education as well as a catalyst for future research. Burnout is always more likely when there is a major mismatch between the nature of the job and the nature of the person who does the job and in this case, academic demands. The result reveals a larger proportion of students reporting higher levels of burnout which may be indicative of inadequate social resources to effectively cope with the rigours of a university community.

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