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Experience of stress and burnout among pastors in China

Abstract

A quantitative survey was conducted among a convenience sample of 164 church ministers in China to test a model relating experience of stress, clergy burnout, and clergy health. Results indicated that respondents experience relatively low levels of stress and burnout. The burnout score was 2.73 on a seven-point scale. Stress from family was a significant predictor of overall burnout. The experience of emotional exhaustion was a significant predictor of the occurrence of adverse health symptoms.

Keywords: clergy stress; occupational health; Maslach Burnout Inventory; China; survey;

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Introduction

As a profession, the clergy is considered stressful (Frame, 1998). Leading church staff and volunteers with diverse backgrounds can be complex and demanding (Adams et al., 2017). They may need to make decisions about the use of limited church resources and, as a result, are subjected to criticism and misunderstanding. The four main stressors identified include personal criticism, boundary ambiguity, overly high expectations, and family criticism (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003). Subjection to a prolonged stress situation often leads to the chronic stress syndrome of burnout (Ahola et al., 2006). The effort-reward imbalance theory postulates that a high-demand, low reward occupation will result in emotional distress and burnout (Siegrist, 1996). The clergy profession, faced with high demand for performance and low monetary reward, has potential for experiencing burnout.

When the clergy suffer from burnout, they may leave the profession prematurely. Their impairment and reduced effectiveness have adverse effects on their wellbeing, their congregation, and the community (Adams et al., 2017). It is therefore important to understand the experience of stress and burnout among the clergy.

Official statistics reported that there were over 38 million Protestants and some 57,000 Protestant clergy in Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches (the non-

denomination official Protestant church supported by the government) in China (Xinhau Agency, 2018). These numbers did not include those associated with unofficial “house churches” not registered with the government. There is no published study on experience of burnout among mainland Chinese pastors. This study attempts to fill this gap.

Literature review

Stress experienced by the clergy

Some studies investigated the specific demands of the ministry (Sanford, 1982; Coate, 1989; Davey, 1996; Kirk and Leary, 1994). Church members expect them to be able to solve all problems (Wu, 2014) and to be on call 24 hours a day (Warner & Carter, 1984). Most of the time, members of the clergy are required to present a public persona. Hence, they find it difficult to admit to stress (Coate, 1989) and tend to cover personal difficulties, which leads to loneliness (Chen, 2013). Furthermore, there is insufficient support from the church in providing time and resources for the personal growth and development (Wu, 2014).

Four types of role stressors have been identified that clergy may experience, including role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work-family conflict (Boyar et al., 2003; Cooper et al., 2001; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000).

Role ambiguity occurs when there are unclear boundaries between clergy and lay

people (Monahan, 1999). Role conflict occurs when a clergyman or woman has to perform multiple roles at the same time (Kay, 2000). Role overload is common among the clergy due to irregular schedules and unpaid overtime work (Beck, 1997). Work-family conflict occurs when job involvement interferes with family life (Ngo & Lau, 1998). An inability to cope with job-related stress and feeling burnt out are the main reasons for leaving the clergy profession (Hoge & Wenger, 2005).

Contextual and personal factors causing burnout within the clergy

Prolonged stress often leads to burnout. Maslach et al. (1986) proposed the Maslach Burnout Inventory to measure burnout. The scale consists of three subscales, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment in reverse coding. Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of depletion that results from excessive work or continuous stress. Depersonalization refers to the feeling of treating other persons in an impersonal way. Lack of personal accomplishment refers to feelings of lack of competence and success in one's work (Maslach et al., 1986). The Maslach Burnout Inventory has 22 items measured by a seven-point scale.

There have been studies adopting Maslach Burnout Inventory to measure burnout among Roman Catholic clergy and Anglican clergy in the U.K. (Frances et al., 2004; Rutledge & Francis, 2004). Among helping professions, clergy experienced

a higher level of burnout than those of counselors, but a lower level than those of police and emergency professionals (Adams et al., 2017). A study in Hong Kong found that the level of burnout among ministers was not high. The mean scores for the three sub-scales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment were 2.91, 1.98 and 5.07 on a seven-point scale (Lau & Lui, 2015). While high levels of burnout among clergy have not been quantified elsewhere, the question remains open in China.

How do the clergy in mainland China experience stress and burnout? *Tian Feng*, the official publication by Three-Self Patriotic Movement, reported that the clergy in China are often overworked and some do not take any rest days. Congregations expect clergy workers to be able to handle all problems (Wu, 2014). Some believe that the clergy should live a poor life financially (Chan & Wong, 2018).

Research objectives

The research objectives of this study are

1. to measure the experience of stress and the degree of burnout among pastors in China; and
2. to test a conceptual model relating role stress, burnout, and health conditions among pastors.

Conceptual framework

Based on the literature, we propose a research model to guide our study (see Figure 1). We propose that the clergy experience stress from church stressors and family stressors. The experience of stress will correlate with burnout. Experience of burnout will correlate with poor clergy health.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Methodology

Sampling

A convenience sampling survey of clergy in an urban city in mainland China was conducted from January to May 2016. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the second author's institute. Written consent was waived as the questionnaire stated that participation would be understood as providing consent. A draft questionnaire was designed based on Lau and Lui's (2015) study and was pilot tested. The final questionnaires were distributed to Three-self Patriotic Movement Church ministry workers at various meetings. Altogether 176 questionnaires were distributed and 172 questionnaires were collected. Eight questionnaires were not included in the sample as more than two-thirds of the questions were not answered. The remaining 164 (i.e. 93%) questionnaires constituted the final sample. Statistical package SPSS version 23 was used for data analysis.

Measures

Experience of stress was measured by asking whether the respondents experienced stress from any of the six work-related stressors such as dispute in the church or any of the five family-related stressors such as financial stress using a five-point scale (1 = no stress at all; 5 = extremely stressful). The Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.73 for church stressors and 0.71 for family stressors. Burnout was measured by Maslach et al. (1986)'s Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) with 22 items on a seven-point scale (1 = never; 7 = every day) (Maslach et al., 1996). In the MBI-HSS, eight items pertaining to lack of personal accomplishment were phrased reversely, with higher score indicating lower burnout. These eight items were later recoded in the compilation of the overall burnout score with higher score indicating higher burnout. The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the three sub-scales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment were 0.81, 0.46, and 0.82 respectively. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of depersonalization was below the acceptable level of 0.70. The removal of two items marked in Table 1 resulted in a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.59.

Clergy health was measured by two indicators. The first indicator was to ask respondents to report whether they had recently experienced any of the following four symptoms: insomnia or insufficient sleep; chronic headache; being easily irritated;

and being forgetful. A variable was compiled by counting the number of symptoms they reported. The second indicator was self-reported health. This was measured by asking respondents to assess the condition of their health on a three-point scale (1 = good, 2 = average, 3 = not good).

Findings

The sample comprised of 60 percent males and 40 percent females. Nearly half of the respondents were aged 21-40 and nearly 90 percent of them were married.

Nearly half of the respondents had served the church full-time for less than 10 years.

Seventy percent of them came from churches in rural areas of the district. Half of the respondents' churches had more than 500 people.

Experience of stress and burnout

Descriptive statistics of experience of stress are shown in Table 1. The mean scores of stress from church work and from family issues were 2.19 and 1.88 respectively, indicating that experience of stress was low. The relatively more prominent stress from church was parishioners' high expectations of preaching. The relatively more prominent stresses from family were financial burden as well as tension between ministry and family. Respondents experienced a higher level of stress from church than from family ($t = 6.7$, $df = 161$, $p < 0.001$).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Descriptive statistics of the 22 statements of the Maslach Burnout Inventory as well as the mean scores for the three sub-scales are shown in Table 2.

The mean scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment were 2.43, 1.91, and 3.84 (on a seven-point scale), with higher score indicating higher level of burnout. Overall, respondents experienced low levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and a moderate level of reduced accomplishment. The mean burnout and standard deviation scores of the sample were 2.73 and 0.50 respectively, indicating an overall low experience of burnout.

Pearson correlation coefficients were compiled for the three sub-scales. Emotional exhaustion was positively correlated with depersonalization ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). Depersonalization was positively correlated with reduced accomplishment ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). However, emotional exhaustion was not correlated with reduced accomplishment ($r = 0.13$, n.s.).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Clergy health

Respondents reported experiencing the four health symptoms to varying degrees. Forty-four percent reported that they experienced forgetfulness. The percentages of respondents reporting insomnia, chronic headache, and feeling easily irritated were 30 percent, 10 percent, and 25 percent respectively. Altogether 27 percent of the sample

did not experience any of the four adverse health symptoms while 3 percent of the sample experienced all four adverse health symptoms. Forty-nine percent of the respondents reported that their health was average. Forty-six percent considered their health good. Only five percent considered their health poor.

Predicting clergy burnout

Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the conceptual model. The predictors were experience of stress from church and family. The predicted variable was burnout. A statistically significant adjusted R square value of 0.12 was obtained. However, only stress from family was a significant predictor ($\beta=0.33$, $p<0.001$). Respondents that experienced higher levels of stress from family were more likely to experience burnout.

Clergy burnout and health

Pearson correlation coefficients were compiled between burnout and clergy health. Results found that burnout was positively correlated with the occurrence of adverse symptoms ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), as well as self-reported health condition ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$).

Two regression models were tested to predict clergy health. In the prediction of occurrence of symptoms, a significant adjusted R square value of 0.11 was obtained. Only emotional exhaustion was a significant predictor. Respondents that experienced

higher levels of emotional exhaustion were more likely to report more frequent occurrence of adverse health symptoms. In the prediction of self-reported health, the adjusted R square value of 0.02 was obtained and was not statistically significant.

Discussion

This quantitative study was conducted to measure the degree of burnout and test a research model relating stress, burnout, and self-reported health among a convenience sample of Protestant ministry workers in China. This study found that the sampled clergy experienced low levels of stress. The issue of financial stress reported in this study echoes with a previous study on pastors' wives in China (Chan & Wong, 2018). Financial stress may attribute to a low salary, lack of medical coverage and education allowances for family members, and the lack of contingency for emergencies (Chan & Wong, 2018). Respondents' experience of work-related stress came more from the congregation's high expectations on preaching. It may indicate that there is a sense of "consumerism" among them. This study found that stress from family had a higher association with burnout than stress from church. This finding indicates that family issues may be more draining than work-related issues.

Comparing the results of this sample with the burnout subscale scores of 16 studies among clergy, mean scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were in the range of that reported in the literature. However, this sample reported a

lower score of personal achievement than that reported in the literature (Adams et al., 2017).

Implications for clergy pastoral care

Although we found lower levels of stress and burnout in this study, congregations and ministry workers may be able to employ strategies that keep levels low, such as reviewing the current pay packages of the ministry workers, encouraging ministry workers to seek helps from professionals, and providing them with training in conflict resolution. Online and offline psychological support resources and programs can be initiated to enhance ministry workers' stress-management skills.

Limitations

This study is based on a convenience sample in one Chinese city, and the findings cannot be generalized into other cities in China. The study covers only the Three-Self churches and does not cover the house churches. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the depersonalization sub-scale is low.

Conclusion

This study on stress and burnout among pastors in China generated similarities with and differences from previous findings in the literature. Respondents experienced low levels of stress from work as well as from family. Respondents experienced similar levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but higher

level of reduced accomplishment when compared with previous studies among clergy.

In multiple regression modelling, stress from family was found to be a significant predictor of overall burnout. The self-reported health condition of the clergy in China was in general average to good, with low occurrence of adverse health symptoms. The score on emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach burnout scale was a significant predictor of adverse health symptoms.

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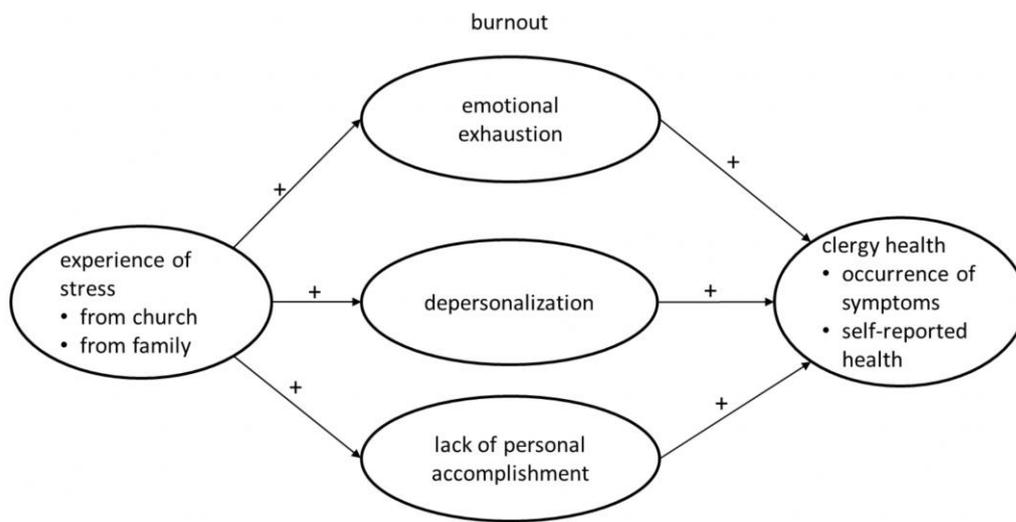
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Figure 1 The conceptual framework



Note: A '+' sign indicates a positive correlation while a '-' sign indicates a negative correlation

Table 1 Experience of stress

| | Mean | S.D. |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Stress from church ($\alpha=0.72$) | 2.19 | 0.70 |
| Congregation's expectations on preaching are too high | 2.50 | 1.05 |
| Dispute in church | 2.35 | 1.05 |
| Fundraising for building new church | 2.29 | 1.10 |
| Overload on preaching | 2.19 | 0.97 |
| Congregation wants to correct my fault at any time | 1.94 | 0.97 |
| Tension with other ministers | 1.83 | 0.97 |
| Stress from family ($\alpha=0.71$) | 1.88 | 0.60 |
| Family financial issues | 2.19 | 0.94 |
| Tension between church ministry and family | 2.18 | 0.94 |
| Poor health of me or a family member | 2.11 | 0.97 |
| Alienated relationship with children | 1.47 | 0.80 |
| Strained marital relationship | 1.42 | 0.80 |

*five-point scale (1=no stress; 5=extremely stressful)

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of burnout and its three sub-scales

| Item/sub-scale | Mean* | S.D. |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Emotional exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.81$) | 2.43 | 0.62 |
| I feel I work too hard at my ministry | 2.86 | 1.18 |
| I feel like I'm at the end of my rope by the end of my work day | 2.73 | 1.04 |
| I feel emotionally drained by my ministry | 2.66 | 1.06 |
| I feel frustrated by my ministry | 2.37 | 0.89 |
| I am at the end of my patience | 2.34 | 1.02 |
| It stresses me too much to work in direct contact with people | 2.25 | 0.89 |
| Working with people all day long requires a great deal of effort | 2.25 | 0.92 |
| I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at work | 2.24 | 1.03 |
| I feel like my ministry is breaking me down | 2.23 | 0.90 |
| Depersonalization ($\alpha = 0.59$ with two items removed) | 1.91 | 0.70 |
| My parishioners make me responsible for their problems# | 2.57# | 1.10 |
| I feel I look after some parishioners impersonally as if they are objects# | 2.49# | 1.23 |
| I really don't care what happens to some of my parishioners | 2.13 | 0.94 |
| I have become more insensitive to people since I've been working | 1.86 | 0.86 |
| I'm afraid that the ministry is making me uncaring | 1.74 | 0.99 |
| Reduced accomplishment^ ($\alpha = 0.82$) | 3.84 | 0.78 |
| I feel full of energy | 4.25 | 1.35 |
| I look after my parishioners' problems very effectively | 4.19 | 1.03 |
| I am easily able to understand what my parishioners feel | 3.92 | 1.14 |
| I am easily able to create a relaxed atmosphere with my parishioners | 3.91 | 1.13 |
| I accomplish many worthwhile things in my ministry | 3.85 | 1.02 |
| I handle emotional problems very calmly in my ministry | 3.65 | 1.17 |
| I feel refreshed when I have been close to my parishioners | 3.52 | 1.21 |
| I feel that I have a positive influence on people through my ministry | 3.36 | 1.14 |
| Burnout | 2.73 | 0.50 |

* seven-point scale (1=never; 7=every day)

not included in the compilation of the depersonalization sub-scale

^ all items in this scale was reversely coded with higher score indicating higher level of burnout.