

# THE CONNECTION BETWEEN STRESS AND BURNOUT: FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHING STAFF OF POLYTECHNIC METRO JOHOR BAHRU

Nurzarimah Jamil

Ms, Polytechnic METrO Johor Bahru, Malaysia, [zarimahjamil@yahoo.com](mailto:zarimahjamil@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Burnout exist within the structure of the organization that threatens not only the well being of the individuals within it, but also the overall working mechanism of the organization. In realizing the factors, we began looking at ourselves, are we actually experiencing burnout? We tend to look at our colleagues, and the sign of weariness could be seen as early as the sun rise. Thus, one could wonder the matters that are revolving around the mind of the colleague. Is burnout epidemic starting to hold its feet in our center? Would daily high stress level contributes to the formation of burnout? This study focuses the connection between stress and burnout: from the perspectives of teaching staff of Polytechnic METrO Johor Bahru (PMJB). The aims of this study are to find out whether stress and burnout prevalent in lecturers in PMJB, to identify the factors contributing to stress and burnout among the lecturers of PMJB and to determine the measurement taken by the lecturers to overcome stress. The qualitative method is used for this study. Interviews were carried out as a method of gaining data for this study. The data gathered is used to answer the research questions.

**Keywords:** Stress, Burnout

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Burnout is the phenomenon in which causes by depersonalization, exhaustion and a diminished sense of accomplishment (Schwab et al. 1986). In as much one would deny, burnout exist within the structure of the organization that threatens not only the well being of the individuals within it, but also the overall working mechanism of the organization.

In realizing the factors, we began looking at ourselves, are we actually experiencing burnout? Is burnout epidemic starting to hold its feet in our center? Would daily high stress level contributes to the formation of burnout? With that in mind, the researcher approached several senior and junior teaching staff who are the lecturers, and the researcher found out that they assume that burnout is taking its toll on many of the colleagues. However, could this assumption be true? Is it based on the assumption that whenever one have stress, especially in the working environment, one is already considered having the syndrome of burnout?

### 1.1. Background of the Study

The world evolves rapidly, and the requirement of personal life and work place puts certain toll on the

individuals. Such predominant view could be justified with the view of Sir William Osler, who stated that “stress and strain could be equated with hard work and worry” (Spielberger, 1979, cited in Angerer, 2003). In lieu of that, the researcher was looking into the stress and strain, or aptly known as stress and burnout from the perspective of the lecturers from the Polytechnic METrO Johor Bahru (PMJB). The study stemmed from the commonly used phrase such as “I’m stressed out” by the lecturers, or what they deemed to believe that they are facing burnout due to work.

Since PMJB is a new education system in Malaysian polytechnic (introduced in 2011), the institution just has 15 lecturers including 1 head of departments who is also teaching, 1 deputy director and 1 director (in the time this study was conducted). These lecturers have to cater all the needs of about 500 students of PMJB. PMJB receives between 100 to 150 students per semester. The age band-with of the students ranging from 18 to 23 years old, specializing themselves in to fields of studies as diploma students. The courses the students are taking in PMJB are Diploma in Islamic Banking and Finance (DIB) and Diploma in Logistics and Supply Chain Management (DLS). They come from a plethora of background with different sets of values and learning styles. In addition, the limited number of lecturers in PMJB not only doing their core business which is teaching but they are also responsible to do other duties especially management jobs. Thus, the responsible of the lecturers to do many duties from teaching to the other jobs is being looked into as whether it is a contributor to stress.

With such diversities, we intend to look at the connection of stress and burnout from the lecturers’ unique perspective. In addition, we are looking into the possibilities of whether the level of stress faced by the academicians is heading towards the onset of burnout, or suggesting the otherwise.

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem

There is a claim that prevalent stress and burnout occurrence among the teaching staff of PMJB. The aim of this study is to examine the degree or level of stress, and its factors contributing towards the burnout.

## 1.3. Research Questions

- a) Is stress and burnout prevalent in lecturers in PMJB?
- b) What are the factors contributing to stress and burnout?
- c) What measures are taken by the subjects to overcome stress?
- d) Are the subjects aware of the symptom of burnout?

## 1.4. Significance of the Study

Cherniss (1980) defined burnout as a chronic difficulty in dealing with stress. Furthermore, the condition will render the person ineffective in dealing with stress and work. With that in mind, we are looking into the possibilities of stress related matters through interviews and observation. The outcome of the study will help to determine the level of stress faced by the lecturers of PMJB, and whether there is a significant signature of burnout presence with the subjects. It may provide an insight to the upper management in the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of factors that revolve around the manpower of the lecturers in PMJB.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lecturer workload and lecturer burnout have been related to lecturer effectiveness. Previous work in the field of burnout suggests that individuals may begin to experience this phenomenon as early as the student teaching experience (Gold, 1985). This review describes the development of burnout and the role of the environmental influence of perceived support on these psychological constructs.

Burnout is a syndrome defined by 3 principal components of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished feelings of personal accomplishment. Unlike major depression disorder, which pervades all aspects of a patient’s life, burnout is a distinct work, related syndrome. Burnout is most likely to occur in jobs that require extensive care of other people.

Burnout is a syndrome that happens in response to chronic job stresses and it’s composed of 3 interrelated dimensions (Maslach, 1995)

**Exhaustion** – mental, physical and emotional – people feel completely over – whelmed and used up. There’s a sense that they cannot handle the next thing demanded on them.

**Cynicism / Depersonalization** – coping mechanism. People from doing their best to doing their bare minimum. Not only the quality but quantity of their work suffers.

**Reduced personal accomplishment** - an abiding sense of failure and not just with regard to efficacy on the job. There is a profound personal worthlessness and people feel there is no redemptive social value in what they are doing (Howard, 1982) Burnout represents an erosion in dignity, spirit and will. It is an erosion of the human soul. (Leiter, 2000)

**Interpersonal Problems:** When someone is emotionally drained at work, dealing with other people becomes extremely difficult. When conflicts occur, a person may overreact with an emotional outburst or increased hostility. Because of this, they may then begin to isolate from other people.

**Emotional Fatigue:** Everyone feels dissatisfaction, anger, frustration or depression from time to time. When caught in a burnout cycle, however, these negative emotions become predominant. Maintaining oneself throughout the day becomes tiring and a person can lose the ability to face challenges with a positive attitude. They may eventually experience numbness and have difficulty in feeling much of anything.

**Low Productivity:** During burnout, it is common for individuals to experience boredom and a lack of enthusiasm for projects. They may begin to question whether their work is meaningful. A manager may feel disillusioned or cynical, and it may be difficult to concentrate and harness the energy required to produce quality work.

**Health Problems:** As emotional reserves ebb, an individual may begin to experience physical problems. They may experience fatigue, or other physical symptoms such as headaches, back pain, colds, insomnia, rashes or hives, chest pains or palpitations, gastrointestinal problems and nervous tics. Sleep problems are also common. When people are experiencing stress, they are more prone not only to illness, but to accidents.

**Addictive Resolution:** Some people resort to substance abuse as they try to cope with chronic stress. An increased intake of caffeine on the job is common, along with nicotine, and drugs such as prescription medication and/or alcohol. In some cases, individuals resort to illegal drug use. Even normal activities such as television or computer use can also become an addiction. An increase or decrease in food intake may also accompany job burnout. These coping mechanisms, however, further compound the problem and fail to address the real burnout issues.

**Obsessive Thinking:** Even when doing other activities during non-working hours, work often continues to preoccupy the mind. Thoughts continually focus on problems rather than on solutions. Some people "work harder," increasing time spent on tasks, just to try to increase a sense of satisfaction.

Some studies have identified certain personality characteristics that may be associated with increased risk of burnout. "Feeling" personality types as classified by the Myers-Briggs Type indicator or individuals who more easily become emotionally involved with their clients also may be predisposed to burnout (Gomez & Michaelis, 1995; Greenglass, Burke, and Konarski, 1999 as cited by Gibelman, 2003). The capacity for empathy however could arguably be considered prerequisite to being an effective helper. Workers who tend toward perfectionism and have high standards and ethics for client and patient care also experience higher levels of stress on the job (Barak et al., 2001; Edwards, Burnard, Coyle, Fothergill & Hannigan, 2001). The notion that service professionals should "care less" for those they serve or «lower their standards for client service» as an antidote for burnout many would consider abhorrent and unethical.

While much of the literature related to burnout has focused on worker or client characteristics, contributing organizational factors should also be considered. Esposito and Fine (p. 737-738, 1985) suggest that «... the burnout ideology fosters the notion that workers are burned out from clients, too much work, or the stresses of human service ... camouflaging systems problems. Cast as a personal and personnel issue, rather than a collective and structural issue, this ideology preserves the illusion that all is well in the agency and the world around it» (as cited by Hartman, 1991).

Role ambiguity and role conflict, bureaucratic constraints on individualization of consumer services, lack of service provider autonomy, inadequate funding, large caseloads, excessive paperwork and concern for the bottom line all create substantial and concrete job stress that leads to burnout. Service providers often experience tension between professional values or philosophies and organizational demands (Hartman, 1991).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In looking into the existence, if any, as claimed by many, burnout among the lecturers at PMJB, this study was carried out within the period of three weeks involving all the 13 lecturers and a Head of Department at PMJB. From the 14 subjects, 10 have been in service for more than 10 years, while the other 4 subjects are the fresh graduates who newly joined PMJB and have been in service for 1 to 3 years. The researcher was looking at the probability of having subjects in service below five years and more than ten years. The researcher was looking into the probability if stress level that they may and the prevalent burnout could be seen within this range of in service years. According to Schwab, Jackson & Schuler (1986) as "the age of the teacher is directly related to burnout and the younger teachers exhibit more symptoms of stress, emotional exhaustion and fatigue than do more experienced teachers", (cited in Douglas et.al,1988,p.2). Furthermore, the rationale for the subjects is that to look at factors that may carry certain similarities or differences among all the subjects. The basis of the interview questions is based on the adaptation of the study conducted by Rodriguez (2006). The questions are divided in 10 sets, and each sets deal with areas of stress related matters, such as self exploration, colleagues' relations, students' relations, physical working environment and others. We adapted the questions based on the relations to the institution.

#### 3.1. THE RESPONDENTS

##### 3.1.1 Subject 1

The subject is a female lecturer in her mid 30's who is currently serving at PMJB. She has been an academician for the past 13 years, and has taught in various higher learning institutions before working in PMJB. She is married and staying approximately 15 kilometers away from her workplace. Being considered as a long serving staff, she has held many management duties besides teaching, and currently serving as the one and only English lecturer. She is teaching for about 27 hour per-week, which included all the English modules for all the semesters in PMJB. She was responsible for management duties as a Public Relation Officer (PRO), Collaborate, Industrial Services & Employment Centre (CISEC) officer, Coordinator of Academic Advisor, Alumni officer and UNESCO club advisor. Currently she is also attached to Students Affair Unit after her role as PRO and CISEC officer were given to other staff.

##### 3.1.2 Subject 2

The subject is a female who has served PMJB for the past two years. She is in her late 20's and newlywed. She lives approximately 5 kilometers away from the institution but her whole family is living in Kuala Lumpur (KL) and she will be back to KL every weekend and come back to JB on Saturday. She has been weekend commuting without fail since she started working in PMJB. Beside teaching, she is currently holding a post of Entrepreneurship officer, a unit known for its high stress level. She is teaching about 17 hour per-week.

##### 3.1.3 Subject 3

The first male lecturer to join PMJB. He is 28 years old, married with 2 children. The wife and children are staying in KL (about 380km away from JB). He is teaching for about 20 hour per-week and also doing management duties as a technical/ maintenance officer and Blended Learning officer. The staff of PMJB usually will report to him for any maintenance issues of PMJB building and facilities. Besides, the subject also has to teach the part time students during weekend for free.

##### 3.1.4 Subject 4

A head of programme for Islamic Banking and Finance. She is in her late 30's and has been teaching for about 15 years. Staying about 40km away from PMJB with family. As a head of programme, she is also required to teach for about 10 hour per-week.

##### 3.1.5 Subject 5

A head of programme for Logistics and Supply Chain Management. She is in her early 40's and has been teaching for about 15 years. Staying with her son in JB but husband is working in KL. Meeting the husband once a month due to the husband's busy career. Teaching for 10 hour per-week and responsible to meet the logistics industries every week for discussion of students' industrial attachment.

##### 3.1.6 Subject 6

This subject is a female who has served PMJB since the first day of its operation in 2011. Teaching for 18 hour per-week but also serve the responsibility as a co-curricular officer. She was a Students Affair officer and had undergone a very hectic schedule everyday-from students data to facing the students disciplinary

problems. She is staying with her family 40km away from PMJB.

### 3.1.7 Subject 7

This subject is teaching Islamic Religion studies. Has been joining PMJB for the past 2 years but has been teaching for 12 years. He did not apply for PMJB, he was transferred with order. Teaching for 27 hour per-week and also responsible as a Head of General Studies Unit and an officer of Syariah compliance in PMJB. Working hard currently in order for PMJB to achieve the honour of being the first polytechnic in Malaysia to be awarded with Syariah compliance.

### 3.1.8 Subject 8

This subject is a female and one of the earliest staff of PMJB. Has been involved in teaching field for 13 years. She is teaching for 17 hour per-week. Holding a position as a Research and Development (R&D) officer of PMJB. She was offered Head of Programme but she declined the offer due to lack of ability and workload. Since then, she has a limited rapport with the Deputy Director, with whom she claimed she did not have good working relationship.

### 3.1.9 Subject 9

This female subject came to PMJB 2 years ago. Currently teaching for 18 hour per-week. Has been married for about 4 years, without kid just yet. She is also an advisor of Students Representative Council. She is seen as the most least job scope compared to the other lecturers.

### 3.1.10 Subject 10

The newest lecturer of PMJB. A fresh graduate and a young lady in her early 20's and still single. A top scorer when she was a student. A very ambitious and energetic person. Teaching for about 20 hour per-week including the subjects which is not her competence (she is a lecturer of Islamic Banking and Finance but she has to teach general studies subject too due to limited number of lecturers in PMJB)

### 3.1.11 Subject 11

This subject requested and applied to join PMJB. She was before, a lecturer at other polytechnic which is situated at Malacca (approximately 280km away from JB) and could not stand to be away from the family (the family is in JB). Served in Malacca for about 2 years before moved to PMJB. Teaching at PMJB for 18 hour per-week and a person incharge of courses for PMJB staff.

### 3.1.12 Subject 12

This subject is also a fresh graduate who joined PMJB after his graduation. No working experience. Still single. He has to teach for 18 hour per-week. His additional duty is, a disciplinary officer of PMJB.

### 3.1.13 Subject 13

The last subject is a Head of Department who is also a teaching staff of PMJB. Been teaching for about 20 years. She has to teach for 6 hour per-week. As a Head of Department, she is a very busy person. She has to know all the happenings in PMJB-from financial to students activities. She is at her early 50's. She worked in a private sector before.

## 4. ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

The outcome of the interviews of all the subjects highlighted a few interesting revelation. In terms of stress and burnout, they both admitted of stress being part and parcel of the job. All the subjects revealed that the amount of stress that they face on a daily basis is within the control. As the researcher look into the matter, all of them highlighted that work load and the order from the top management are the greatest contributing factors that may inflict the stress in them. However, in view of this, the level of stress generated by work load and the authority of top management are within their control. In other words, stress has been accepted as part and parcel of the administrative and management post that they are currently shouldering. The acceptance of such correlation, i.e. work load and stress, has enabled them to work on measures to counter the condition. With such view, the physical aspect of burnout is not evident from the researcher observation of them, since they are regarded by others as those whom enjoy teaching and being around with students. According to Esteve (2000), "teacher stress may be seen as the perception of an imbalance between demands at school and the resources teachers have for coping with them" (as cited in Wood & McCarthy, 2001). In light of this, although the subjects listed students as the greatest challenge in terms of teaching,

however, there is a mentioning of good “day off”, part of the resources that may inflict certain degree of stress on them.

The researcher found that all the subjects have a great faith in their believe (all the subjects are Muslim). As a Muslim, one is taught to trust the Almighty Allah’s test to the chosen people because they are capable to handle the test. The subjects claimed that the stress they are facing in PMJB is a test from Allah and they accept it wisely. Clearly, this believe makes the lecturers feel positive and grateful with the work they are facing at PMJB.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Ministry of Education, Malaysia as well as to the Malaysia Polytechnic Education Division. You have given me the golden opportunity by funding me to present and share this research to the world. My immediate supervisors, colleagues and students who also helped me in doing this research and I came to know about so many new things I am really thankful to them. I would also like to thank my parents, husband, sisters and brother who helped me a lot in finalizing this research within the limited time frame.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Bourgeault, I.L., Luce, J., MacDonald, M. The caring dilemma in midwifery. *Community, Work and Family*.2006;9:389–406.
- Centre for Maternal and Child Enquiries (CMACE), 2010. A review of Maternal Deaths in London January 2009–June 2010.
- Cherniss, P. Why do midwives leave? (Not) being the kind of midwife you want to be. *British Journal of Midwifery*. 1980;14:27–31.
- Esteve, R., ‘Switching and swapping faces’: performativity and emotion in midwifery. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion*. 2000.
- Gold, R., Supporting midwives to support women. in: L.A. Page, R. McCandlish (Eds.) *The New Midwifery Science and Sensitivity in Practice*. 2nd edn. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh; 1985.
- Hartman, M., 1991. Midwife-led versus other models of care for childbearing women. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, CD004667.
- Maslach, A. Retention and autonomy in midwifery practice. in: L. Frith, H. Draper (Eds.) *Ethics and Midwifery*.Books for Midwives, Edinburgh; 1995
- Rodriguez, E. An exploration of factors contributing to stress and burnout in male hispanic middle school teachers. Florida, USA. 2006
- Sandall, J. Occupational burnout in midwives: new ways of working and the relationship between organizational factors and psychological health and well-being. *Risk Decision and Policy*. 1998;3:213–232.
- Schwab, J.B.,et al, The safety attitudes questionnaire: psychometric properties, benchmarking data, and emerging research. *BMC Health Service Research*. 1986;6:1–10.
- Todd, C.J., Farquhar, M.C., Camilleri-Ferrante, C. Team midwifery: the views and job satisfaction of midwives.*Midwifery*. 1998;14:214–224.
- Wood, C., McCarthy, D., 2001. Workplace Bullying, Patient Violence and Quality of Care: A Review. NIHR King’s Patient Safety and Service Quality Centre (PSSQ) Workforce Programme, Working Paper 1, King’s College London, London.