Psychosocial Safety Climate and Burnout: The Mediating Role of Challenge and Hindrance Demands

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ABSTRACT

Objective – In recent years, the prevalence of job burnout among Malaysian research universities (RU) academics has accelerated due to the demands of teaching, in addition to administrative work, consultation, research, and publications.
Methodology/Technique – This study reviews literature relating to burnout, and the use of Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) to create a better working environment by managing demands and providing a high level of resources to deal with demands or tasks at work. This study presents a better job design by PSC through challenge and hindrance demands which may decrease the level of burnout among RU academicians. Therefore, this paper suggests that challenges and hindrance demands are a potential mediator of the relationship between PSC and burnout.
Findings – This study concludes that PSC can be used to minimize burnout among academics by providing references for an excellent job design, enhancing job demands whilst diminishing hindrance demands.
Novelty – RU management or policy-makers may apply PSC in their design of the role of academics within their institution, so that the related work policies, practices, and procedures are enhanced. This method is crucial to ensure that the challenge and hindrance demands of academicians are properly managed to reduce their risk of burnout.

Type of Paper: Review.
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Keywords: Academics; Burnout; Challenge Demands; Hindrance Demands; Psychosocial Safety Climate; Research Universities.

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1. Introduction

Public universities in Malaysia are progressing towards being world class Research Universities (RU) whereby research and publications are emphasized as part of the Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX) commenced by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education.

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In 2006, four Malaysian public universities were appointed as RU by the Malaysian government, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Meanwhile in 2010, another Malaysian public university, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) was also awarded with RU status (MOHE, 2017).

The responsibilities, job demands, and status, particularly for RU academics, are significantly different to other public universities in Malaysia (MdYunus & Pang, 2015). Moreover, academics from RUs experience more stress due to the fierce competition to maintain their RU title or their rank within their institution. It is always challenging to maintain RU status and the goals to be achieved are cascaded down to academic staff based on the targets set by the Malaysian Research Assessment (MyRA). Among the criteria examined in the MyRA are the quality and quantity of researchers, postgraduate and research, innovation and intellectual possessions, and income generation events (Azman, Pang, Sirat & MdYunus, 2014). Further, the key performance indicators (KPI) appointed to every RU academicians are also demanding. The KPIs are assigned to all academic staff to intensify their research activities, enhance their development and commercialization, accelerate the number of post-graduate and post-doctoral students, increase the number of academic staff with Ph.D status, increase the number of foreign students, fortify the centers of excellence, and ameliorate the ranking of higher learning institutions in Malaysia (MOHE, 2017). As a consequence, this places further stress on RU academics to fulfil the KPIs.

Teaching and researching are not only onerous, but they are also intricate tasks that demand complete dedication. Furthermore, academics are expected to be professional in terms of engaging emotionally with their work (Watts & Robertson, 2011). Hence, higher education is considered as among the most significant institutional organizations of a country. Therefore, many academic staff experience higher levels of burnout than those who in the general working population (Guthrie, Lichten, Van Belle, Ball, Knack & Hofman, 2017). In 2017, MOHE proposed that all Malaysian Research Universities (RU) lead a grand challenge program and sustainable development goals to translate the research conducted at the university into direct benefits for society. Hence, Malaysian RUs undertake projects in partnership with other higher learning institutions to address issues of water and food security, health and wellbeing as well as climate change. It is anticipated that these projects will contribute to knowledge assimilation and diversification of research funding (MOHE, 2017). Overall, as Malaysian universities progress towards achieving RU status, academic staff become more susceptible to burnout due to the unavoidable exposure to excessive stress (Henny, Anita, Hayati & Rampal, 2014).

Hence, this paper recommends the adoption of the Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) theory as a guide for preferred working atmospheres by supplying feasible job demands and greater job resources to manage demands at work (Bond, Tuckey & Dollard, 2010; Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Dollard et. al., 2012; Law, Dollard, Tuckey & Dormann, 2011). In addition, Idris, Dollard and Winefield (2011) state that PSC is inversely correlated to burnout via job demands. Hence, this paper contends that PSC projects may have adverse consequences for job demands and psychosocial effects, such as burnout. Job demands refers to the facets of work that require sustained cognitive, emotional, and physical effort to comply with the work tasks (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) and play a crucial role in diminishing burnout among academic staff through PSC. However, Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling and Boudreau (2000) suggest that job demands should be classified as challenge demands and hindrance demands, so that the way that these two types of demands develop different processes through which PSC affects burnout can be determined. Hence, this study aims to develop a better job design by PSC through challenge and hindrance demands, which can be used to decrease burnout among RU academics. The paper suggests that challenge and hindrance demands are a potential mediator of the relationship between PSC and burnout.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Burnout

Burnout is a symptom of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that is experienced by workers who usually deal with other individuals such as those working in social service, health management, and tutoring (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). Burnout is a mode of physical, emotional and mental tiredness resulting from enduring engagements in work-related activities that are extremely challenging (Harrison, 1999). Over the years, empirical research has shown that burnout is experienced in every industry (Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996; Maslach, Leiter & Schaufeli, 2008).

2.1.1 Burnout Among Academicians in Malaysian Research Universities

Emotional exhaustion, which is regarded as the most crucial measure of burnout (Halbesleben & Bowler; 2007; Janssen, Peeters, de Jonge, Houkes & Tummers, 2004), is experienced in high levels among half of all academics due to increased levels of stress, including high workload, low supportive connections and personal commitment, lack of manpower and personal growth (Khan, Rasli, Khan, Yasir & Malik, 2014; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). Hence, academics often experience job dissatisfaction, low productivity, absenteeism, high levels of turnover, and depression due to high stress and burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion (Ohue, Moriyama & Nakaya, 2011; Messmer, Bragg & Williams, 2011; Rudman & Gustavsson, 2011).

2.2 Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)

PSC refers to a shared perception among academics regarding the policies, practices, and procedures within their universities that relate to psychological health and well-being (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Empirical evidence shows that PSC is a forerunner of job-related strain factors in multilevel analyses using both cross-sectional (Law et. al., 2011) and longitudinal (Bond et. al., 2010; Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Dollard et al., 2012) designs. These studies demonstrate that PSC is a useful guideline of an improved working environment promoting the use of manageable demands and an increased level of resources to deal with demand or duties at work. Dollar and Bakker (2010) state that poor PSC within an organization may contribute to unsatisfactory job designs such as increased levels of work stress and emotional demands. On the other hand, a higher level of PSC usually lowers job demands and promotes a positive working environment with sufficient resources for employees.

2.3 Challenge Demands

Challenge demands represent the job demands which are viewed by academics as worthwhile work experiences providing opportunity for individual development (Cavanaugh et. al., 2000). For instance, high job accountability, job complexity, workload, and time constraints may increase stress levels, however, they may also promote personal development, creativity, and innovation (LePine, Podsakoff & LePine, 2005; Cavanaugh et. al., 2000). Therefore, Cavanaugh et. al. (2000) claim that challenge demands refer to the challenges to be overcome by employees to enable them to develop their skills and advance further in their career.

2.4 Hindrance Demands

Hindrance demands are defined as the job demands which are perceived as barriers to individual development or demands that intervene with or prevent one's ability to obtain treasured targets (Cavanaugh et. al., 2000). Hindrance demands are perceived as obstructions which unnecessarily slow down an

individual's achievements and reward at work. For example, red tape, conflict, job insecurity, and organizational politics (Cavanaugh et. al., 2000) may diminish personal achievement and create adverse consquences such as anxiety, anger, and counterproductiveness (Rodell & Judge, 2009), as well as turnover and disengagement behaviors (Podsakoff, LePine & LePine, 2007).

3. Research Methodology

A literature review is conducted on the topic of burnout, confined to the education industry, focusing specifically on burnout among Malaysian RU academics. This study examines only full-time academics who have worked more than one year with a Malaysian RU, namely UM, UKM, UPM, USM and UTM. Previous studies demonstrate that the socialization process typically takes at least 6 months in any given workplace (Filstad, 2004; Katz, 1978; Morrison, 1993; Van Maanen, 1975). Furthermore, academic staff may not encounter burnout during the first year of their working life. On the other hand, the study excludes RU academics who are on medical, maternity, sabbatical or study leave during the study period, as well as trainee lecturers and tutors from the respective Malaysian RUs.

Unexpectedly, the primary source of burnout among academics is the result of challenge and hindrance job demands. Therefore, PSC is put forward as the method to minimize burnout levels of academicians by guiding the development of better job designs, whereby challenge job demands are enhanced while the implications of hindrance demands are diminished. As a result, a better working environment is promoted, whereby the mental health of Malaysian RU academic staff is prioritized. A literature review is further conducted to determine if challenge and hindrance demands can be used to enhance the relationship between PSC and burnout among RU academics.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 The Relationship Between PSC and Burnout

There are various features of psychological health including burnout, depression and anger, which are all related to PSC, which represents a particular climate for psychological health within an organization (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Idris & Dollard, 2011; Law et. al., 2011). Moreover, Dollar and Bakker (2010) also state that PSC is highly correlated to job burnout via job demands, and these relationships are delineated by the Conservation Resource Theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2001).

PSC acts as an organizational resource to provide employees with support mechanisms (Law et. al., 2011). A healthier and happier workforce is cultivated when workers' well-being is prioritized (Mathieu & Taylor, 2007). Consequently, stress in the workplace is minimized. Therefore, a lower degree of PSC could result in burnout, depression, and anger (Idris et. al., 2011). This is consistent with previous research which states that a positive safety climate is associated with lower levels of workplace stress (Oliver, Cheyne, Tomas & Cox, 2002; Siu, Phillips & Leung, 2004). Likewise, Heffernan, Harries and Kirby (2018) claim that PSC is inversely correlated to personal burnout, work-related burnout, and customer-related burnout. In conjunction with the above findings, it is suggested that a higher level of PSC will results in lower levels of burnout among employees.

4.2 Relationship Between PSC and Job Demands (Challenge Demands and Hindrance Demands)

Prior research shows that PSC is negatively correlated to job demands which leads to destructive work outcomes such as burnout, depression, and anger, particularly among Malaysian worker (Idris et. al., 2011; Idris, Dollard, Coward & Dormann, 2012; Idris & Dollard, 2011). Although there is still dispute as to whether PSC can diminish the effect of job demands at work, most of the previous research in this area supports the conclusion that job demands are always negative (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Idris et. al., 2012).

As a result, Yulita, Idris and Dollard (2014) recommend that job demands must be differentiated into challenge demands and hindrance demands, so that the repercussions of job demands on work and employees can be persuasively explained. Their study concludes that PSC at a team level may reduce levels of hindrance demands, however, surprisingly the same effect is not experienced with challenge demands. Hence, PSC is believed to be an important approach to decrease the effect of negative job demands while promoting a healthier and safer working environment (Yulita et. al., 2014).

4.3 Relationship Between Job Demands (Challenge Demands and Hindrance Demands) and Burnout

Job demands, which include challenge and hindrance job demands, are positively related to burnout in different organizational contexts (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004; Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005; Brough et. al., 2013; Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004; Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). However, Yulita et. al. (2014) argues that it is the nature of job demands that determine the connection between job demands and burnout, particularly with respect to emotional exhaustion.

Based on prior research, it is concluded that emotional exhaustion is positively correlated with both challenge demands and hindrance demands (Yulita et. al., 2014; LePine et. al., 2004; Van den Broeck, de Cuyper, de Witte & Vansteenkiste, 2010). It is further stated that challenge demands are job demands which are unable to prevent challenge demands from fostering emotional exhaustion among employees (Yulita et. al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is stronger relationship between hindrance demands and emotional exhaustion in comparison to the effect of challenge demands on emotional exhaustion. Therefore, employees are more likely to experience burnout if they are unable to manage their job demands within the allocated time period. From the discussion above, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between challenge and hindrance job demands and burnout.

5. Discussion

Based on the discussion above, it is concluded that PSC has a negative connection to job demands while both types of job demands, namely challenge demands and hindrance demands, are positively related to burnout. It is also shown that PSC is negatively correlated to burnout. Hence, this paper proposes that both challenge and hindrance job demands are potential mediators for the relationship between PSC and burnout since the relationships from PSC to job demands and both types of job demands to burnout are significant.

Furthermore, Idris et. al. (2012) as well as Idris, Dollard and Yulita (2014) demonstrate that job demands significantly mediate the relationship between PSC and emotional exhaustion. Likewise, a significant and indirect relationship also exists in the relationship between PSC and depression through job demands (Idris et. al., 2012). However, the examination of job demands in previous studies were not differentiated into challenge demands and hindrance demands to test its mediatory effect on the relationship between PSC and burnout.

Moreover, it is found that among all the climate measures, only PSC is significantly and negatively correlated with job demands, including: workload, emotional demands, and psychological demands (Idris et. al., 2012). Surprisingly, this association exists only among Malaysian employees while there is no relationship among Australian workers (Idris et. al., 2012). Hence, it is critical to test the indirect effect of different types of job demands in Malaysia so that the job demands are well-manipulated by PSC to create the desired positive impact on job experience among Malaysian RU academics.

6. Conclusion

PSC is valuable in diminishing the effect of burnout as it emphasizes employee well-being and reduces the rate of employee burnout. In addition, when PSC is applied to different types of job demands, the implications of hindrance demands are reduced while maintaining the effect of challenge demands. Even

though challenge and hindrance demands are positively related to burnout, hindrance demands are more highly correlated to burnout compared to challenge demands. In conclusion, a better understanding of the relationship between PSC and burnout is possible if the mediatory role of challenge and hindrance demands is considered.

6.1 Implications

The application of a comprehensive PSC framework (high commitment from management, priority, communication and participation for RU academics' psychosocial health and safety) may serve as a guideline for the change of management practices in Malaysian RUs. This would contribute to better working environments in which manageable job demands are maintained and relevant KPIs can be created by RU management or policy-makers through the translation of PSC into real working environments. The conclusions in this study are vital to ensure a high job commitment among RU academics while reducing burnout levels.

6.2 Future Research

Future research may wish to implement addition external factors, such as demographic location, social forces, technological considerations, and economics, that can be used by management to create a more vigorous PSC model, as the existing PSC model is typically developed based on organizational factors only. Furthermore, an integration of PSC with other climate measures, such as safety climate, may be implemented in future research.

A better apprehension of the interesting concepts via the integration of PSC and safety climate is anticipated when both of them are applied together to examine the psychological and physical health of employees. Meanwhile, a cross-sectional study may have an effect on climate consciousness due to the experience of distress at one point in time. Dollard and Bakker (2010) further argue that psychological health changes over time owing to effects of PSC. As a result, it is recommended that data be collected at three different points in time, to ensure the best examination of the mediatory effects (Huang, Hammer, Neal & Perrin, 2004). In this study, PSC is considered as the antecedent to job demands among RU academics. Nonetheless, a higher level of antecedent to PSC, which influencse PSC directly and job demands indirectly, may be identified in future research.

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