

The Relationship Between Adult Attachment Style and Burnout: The Mediating Effect of Resilience

Jianing Gong^{1,*}

¹Guangzhou Foreign Language School

*Email: jianingong928@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With worldwide range increase of burnout in the workplace, ascending amount of investigates were focusing on the contributing factors of burnout, including resilience and adult attachment styles. However, the interactive effect of adult attachment styles and resilience on job burnout is less clear. Moreover, most of studies examined western workers, and little is known about the Chinese working population. Hence, the present study investigated 241 Chinese workers from diverse industries (Mage = 37.94, SDage = 10.04; 57.63% females), and examined the mediation effect of resilience on the relationship between adult attachment and job burnout. A cross-sectional online survey design was adopted. Results showed that a fully mediating effect of resilience occurred on the relationship of secure attachment styles (compared to avoidant attachment) and burnout while no significant relationships were found in anxious (vs. avoidant) attachment model. Our findings suggest that managers should help employees develop higher resilience to achieve less job burnout, especially for employee with secure attachment styles.

Keywords: Chinese workers, adult attachment, resilience, job burnout

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the high levels of job burnout and its serious consequences have received great attention [25][29]. However, there are few studies investigating the magnitude and influencing factors of burnout among Chinese workers (see exception in [10]). In 2008, China Human Resources Network conducted a survey on the status of job burnout of employees in the workplace in China, and found that nearly 74.6% of employees reported different degrees of job burnout, of which 10.8% shown serious job burnout. Job burnout has become a common problem among employees of enterprises and institutions in China, which has aroused the concern of the whole society. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the levels of job burnout of general employees in China and explore how factors such as adult attachment and resilience buffer or exacerbate their job burnout.

Burnout was first proposed by American clinical psychologists Freudenberger [8] to describe a very exhausted mental state experienced by workers in the service industry, which is manifested as long-term emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion, work volume Low entry level, negative attitude towards clients, reduced sense of work achievement and other symptoms. Pines and Aronson [25-26] further defined job burnout as a state

of physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion resulting from prolonged involvement in emotionally demanding situations, which was the definition of burnout we adopted in the current study. In early research, job burnout of employees from service industry received great attention [24]. The scope of job burnout has been expanded to be applicable to general employees at the later point [24]. There are many factors that affect job burnout, which can be roughly divided into two types, situational factors and individual factors. Individual factors, the focus of this study, including demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education level, [21], personality [35][17] and job attitudes [18]. Few studies examined other individual factors as adult attachment [25][27] and resilience [10][22], however those studies examined the independent effect of attachment or resilience on burnout but not the interactive effect of these two variables. Hence, the present study investigated Chinese workers from diverse industries and examined the mediation effect of resilience on the relationship between adult attachment and job burnout.

1.1. Attachment and Job Burnout

With the increasing concern in world-wide health care for employees, abundant of studies focused on the sources

of burnout in order to find malleable factors that need to be recognized and intervened to help employees adjust the high level of burnout. One of the most important and well acceptable concepts that have been associated with burnout is adult attachment styles.

The remarkable attachment theory was proposed by Bowlby and Ainsworth [1][3], focusing on the interaction between babies and their caregivers only. Hazan and Shaver [12] explored Bowlby's attachment styles theories [3] under romantic relationship and pointed out that the emotional tie built up through romantic relationship was similar to the one between babies and their caregivers, and defined adult attachment styles in the three similar dimensions as Bowlby referred: secure attachment, anxious/ambivalent attachment, avoidant attachment [3].

Pines [25], as the first study, addressed the association between adult attachment styles and burnout by conducting a comprehensive cross-cultural investigation, found a negative association between secure attachment style and burnout while positive correlations were found between avoidant and anxious attachment style and burnout Israeli MBA students, Hungarian social studies students, Israeli dialysis nurses and national samples of Israeli Jews and Arabs. Similarly, Ronen and Mikulincer [27] examined the relationship between adult attachment and burnout in a sample of in a sample of Israeli employees and found that anxiety and avoidance attachment were associated with more job burnout, however the relationship between avoidance attachment and burnout was fully mediated by lower appraisals of organizational fairness, meanwhile the association between anxiety attachment style and burnout was partially mediated by lower appraisals of team cohesion.

1.2. The Effect of Resilience

Besides adult attachment styles, numerous studies have explored influencing individual factors of burnout, resilience has also gripped a great deal of attentions as one of them. Resilience was defined as the ability to overcome adverse conditions and to recover and function properly in the face of risk and stress situation [15][33]. Previous studies had already found out the relation of resilience on burnout in variety of groups and contexts. Guo and colleagues [10] investigated the levels of job burnout on Chinese nurses and how personal resilience impacted on it. They found that Chinese nurses experienced high levels of burnout and reported a moderate level of resilience. Nurses' burnout was negative associated with their personal resilience (i.e., strength). McCain [22] examined the job burnout of doctors and how it was affected by doctors' coping style and resilience. Burnout was related to higher secondary traumatic stress, lower levels of resilience, and more frequent use of maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance use, self-blame, and behavioral disengagement.

Despite above research, there was no direct examination of the relationship between adult attachment, resilience and job burnout, especially how the personal resilience could affect the association between adult attachment style and job burnout. However, there were some studies suggesting a close association between attachment style and resilience where individuals' attachment style could impact on their personal resilience rather than the opposite way. Not only this directional relationship has conceptual meaning, but several longitudinal studies found evidence to support such relationship [9].

Moreover, a number of research looking at the association between attachment style and personal adjustment and how resilience plays a role in it. For example, Karreman and Vingerhoets [16] examined how resilience mediated the relationship between adult attachment and personal well-being. They found that resilience partly mediated the link of well-being with secure and fearful attachment while fully mediated the link of well-being with dismissing and preoccupied attachment styles. Similarly, Thompson and colleagues [32] found that medical students' anxiety and avoidance attachment predicted their levels of perceived stress and resilience partly mediated such relationship.

Based on above examinations, it is reasonable to assume personal resilience would meditate the relationship between adult attachment and their job burnout. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the levels of job burnout of general employees in China and explore how factors such as adult attachment and resilience buffer or exacerbate their job burnout. We hypothesized the mediating process will be that workers who are more secure attached may report higher resilience and then the well-functioning of resilience enables people to bounce back and recover quickly after stressful events, leading to a lower burnout. As for anxious and avoidant attachment styles, a lower level of resilience will be resulted and then contribute to a higher level of burnout.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participant Characteristics

The present research surveyed 241 individuals among the general working population in China, including 239 full-time workers and 9 part-time jobs workers. Samples are recruited mostly from southern and northern part of China. Gender was averagely distributed, with 100 male participants and 136 female participants and 5 participants didn't provide their gender information. Participants were workers from over 16 industries (see Table 1), the vast amount of them were from education industry (25.30%) and service industry (14.90%). Participants were adults aged from 18 to 63, with 3 people not reporting their age. The maximum working age of participants was 40 years, with 2 missing data.

2.2. Procedure

The research was administered to general workers in China in form of online questionnaires through snowballing method. Participants consent was obtained at the start of the survey. Questionnaires were translated into Chinese. It contains two important parts. The first page was to ask some basic demographic information of participants. Another section measured participants' attachment styles, levels of burnout and resilience.

2.3. Measurement Instruments & Demographic Variables

We asked participants to indicate their current main job and the length of time they work on this job. Participants also need to inform whether it is full-time job or part-time job. Most of the participants are working in a full-time job, while only a few participants who basically are students, are working in a part-time job. Participants were also asked to report their age, marital status, highest educational level and the socio-economic status.

2.4. Adult Attachment Type Measure

Worker's attachment style was measured by using The Adult Attachment Types measure, which was developed by Hazan & Shaver [12], a highly reliable scale that contains three short paragraphs describing the three attachment styles (Secure, Avoidant and Anxious/Ambivalent). Participants are required to choose to which paragraph describes their feelings. Here is one statement that represents anxious attachment style:

'I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, others want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.'

2.5. The Burnout Measure, Short Version

Worker's job burnout levels were measured by using The short version of the Burnout Measure [26]. It asks participants about their overall feelings to work by presenting 10 negative emotional states, such as "Hopeless" and "Physically weak /Sickly" then make participants to choose to what extent the statement describe themselves. In this article, the shorter version is used and translated into Chinese. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.84, which indicates good reliability.

2.6. The Brief Resilience Scale

The Brief Resilience Scale (RBS) [31] was designed to assess the ability to bounce back or recover from stressful events. Participants self-report their situation and match with the different situations stated. Same as others, there is a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally

agree) for participants to choose to what extent the statements describe their situation. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was 0.9, which indicates excellent reliability.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Characteristics of Participants

Participants were aged from 18 to 63 (N = 238, M = 37.94, SD = 10.04). Genders are averagely distributed, 42.37% of them are males (N = 100) and 57.63% of them are females (N = 136).

Participants are employed from over 16 industries in China, the classification of industries was based on the official statement published in 2017 in China [34].

We also took account for the two specific types of jobs, full-time employment (N = 239, 93.60%) and part-time employment (N =9, 3.70%). This showed that the vast majority of our examples were working in full-time jobs.

Table 1. The distribution of participants' located industries.

Industries	Sample size	percentage
Education industry	61	25.30%
Service industry	36	14.90%
Construction industry	18	7.50%
IT industry	10	4.10%
public administration industry	10	4.10%
Financial industry	10	4.10%
Student	10	4.10%
Manager	28	11.60%

Note. Manger is position, since the participants did not inform the industry.

Moreover, we also collect the education level of participants. Description analysis showed that more almost half of the participants have received undergraduate degree (N = 123, 51.00%). 25.70% of participants obtained associate degree. In addition, 16.20% of them were postgraduate or above. Only 17 participants, which was 7.10%, had only attended high school or lower. In terms of participants' social economic statue, results showed participants were spread in level 10 (represents the highest socio-economic status) to level 1 (represents the lowest socio-economic status) (M = 4.39, SD =2.00).

The marital status also been collected that was, over three quarters of the participants were married (N = 181, 75.10%). Also, the percentage of participants who were still single was 21.60%. 4 participants were divorced and 4 participants were not willing to tell.

Correlation analysis suggested that, social economic status was significant correlated with job burnout and resilience among secure attachment individuals (p = .017, p = .001). Among individuals who reported avoidant and anxious attachment style, social economic status was insignificantly related to both burnout (p = .101, p=.165) and resilience (p = .805, p = .270). Education level was also significantly related to burnout in secure attachment individuals (p = .046), while for the rest two insecure attachment styles, insignificant results occurred again (p =.569, p = .273). Age showed no significant correlation with burnout or resilience in neither of three attachment style groups. The independent sample t-test of burnout (t = -.22, p = .83) and resilience (t = 1.17, p= .24) scores showed no significant difference between females and males.

3.2. Descriptive and Correlation Analysis among Focal Variables

The 57.26% of participants (N = 138) were secure attachment, it matched the finding of Hazan and Shaver [12] that indicate 60% of random sample had secure attachment. The 33.61% of the participants were avoidant attachment (N = 81) and 9.13% of them were anxious attachment (N = 22).

The mean, standard deviation, and range of burnout and resilience are stated in Table 2. Because adult attachment style was categorical variable, so we divided participants into 3 groups based on their attachment styles. The scores in burnout and resilience were also taken in groups. Results showed participants with avoidant attachment style tended to have highest level of job burnout. Secure attachment style group reported the lowest levels of job burnout. When it came into resilience, it was shown that people with higher level of secure attachment reported a highest resilience while avoidant group reported the lowest levels of resilience.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation and range of burnout and resilience

Adult Attachment	Measures	Mean	SD	Range
Avoidant attachment	Burnout	2.65	.76	1.00-4.60
	Resilience	3.15	.61	1.83-5.00
	Burnout	2.26	.68	1.00-4.50

Secure attachment	Resilience	3.70	.62	2.00-5.00
Anxious attachment	Burnout	2.43	.67	1.00-3.50
	Resilience	3.22	.50	2.00-4.33

We also conducted a correlation analysis, a negative correlation was consistently found between burnout and resilience among the three attachment styles, secure (r = -.46, p < .001), anxious (r = -.40, p = .023) and avoidant attachment (r = -.48, p < .001). That indicates that for individuals with secure, avoidant and anxious attachment, lower levels of resilience were correlated with higher levels of job burnout.

3.3. Mediation Analysis

We examined the mediating effects of resilience in the relationship between adult attachment and Chinese workers' job burnout using the PROCESS macro [11] in SPSS 25. The results are shown in figure 1.

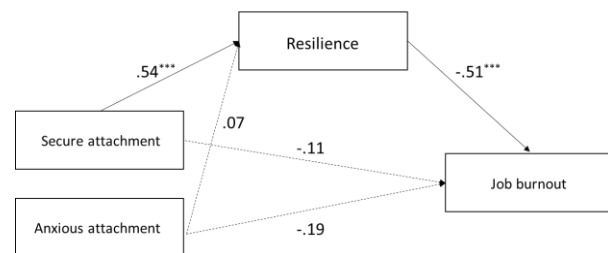


Figure 1. The mediation result of resilience in the relationship between adult attachment and job burnout.

Note. solid lines indicate significant relationship while dotted line indicate non-significant relationship. ***p< .001.

As adult attachment was a categorical variable, so in our mediation analysis, avoidant attachment style was defined as the reference group. Compared to avoidant attachment, secure attachment style predicted lower level of job burnout, and this relationship was fully mediated by resilience (β = -.28, bootSE= .06, 95% CI [-.41, -.17]). It suggests that individuals were secure attachment style tended to have higher levels of resilience, which in turn, reported lower levels of job burnout. However, compared to avoidant attachment, resilience did no mediate the relationship between anxious attachment style and burnout (β = -.19, bootSE = .15, 95% CI [-.17, .09]).

In conclusion, resilience played a fully mediating role in relationship of secure attachment (vs. avoidant) and burnout. No mediating effect of resilience was found between anxious (vs. avoidant) attachment style and job burnout.

4. DISCUSSION

Nowadays with ascending competition in all walks of life, employees' burnout become a popular topic which requires attentions. The present study investigated the association between Chinese workers' adult attachment style and job burnout and how personal resilience affected such relationship. We found that the association between adult secure attachment styles (compared to avoidant style) and workers' burnout was fully mediated by resilience. This suggests that individuals who have secure attachment style can develop a higher resilience ability. In turn, when they face the stressful condition in workplace, less burnout may be resulted. However, such meditation relationship was not found in anxious (compared to avoidant) attachment group.

4.1. Mediation Effect of Resilience

To explain in more details, there were about 57.00% people considered themselves secure attachment, which confirms the finding of Hazan and Shaver [12], who stated nearly 60.00% of adult categorized themselves as secure attachment. And we found that secure attachment was positively associated with workers' resilience levels, compared to avoidant attachment. This is in line with the study of Shibue and Kasai [30], they study the relations between attachment style, resilience and earned security in Japanese universities. They revealed that secure attachment was associated with higher resilience. This is because individuals who are secure attachment tend to perceive more emotional and instrumental supports from variables sources, colleagues, friends, families or partners than anxious or avoidant attachment styles and to actively seek those supports, trust and build up intimate relationships with others [7]. These all result in higher resilience ability to help them manage stressful situations and adversities. In stressful working situation, workers with higher secure attachment would be able to adjust their attitudes toward positive aspects such as "I can deal with it", "keep hard-working and gain what you deserve", which shows a higher self-reliance or self-regulation [4-5], or they may just actively search emotional comforts from all kinds of social supports [28]. These contribute to a well-performing resilience mechanism which was the ability that can help individuals overcome adversities and stressful situation [14].

However, anxious attachment was insignificantly associated with resilience in this study, which contradicts findings of Shibue and Kasai [30]. One potential possibility may be the poor representation of anxious attachment style in our Chinese worker sample that there were only 22 individuals identified themselves as anxious attachment style (9.13%). The percentage also contradicts the finding of Hazan and Shaver [12] that approximately 20.00% adults may recognize themselves as anxious attachment style.

In the relation between resilience and burnout, our study result is in line with the findings of Guo [10]. Guo's research studied the nurses' burnout and the relationship with resilience in China, and their study revealed that resilience strength, which was a subscale of resilience, showed a strong and negative relationship with burnout. Despite the disparity that in our studies, the samples are workers from diverse industries in China, not in a nurse, we still found similar results with Guo and colleagues' study [10]. Resilience as the ability of recovering from adversity, can contribute people with positive stress-coping ways or enable individuals to see stress in a more beneficial perspective [19]. For instance, workers with higher strength, which is a component of resilience, may consider pressure in workplace as a normal part of everyday-life or consider them as opportunities such as promotion, instead of a threat [10]. This integration can be achieved and keep growing, lead to even higher resilience. Therefore, those workers may cope perceived stress effectively, which result in less burnout after coming through adverse work experiences.

4.2. Effect of Demographic Variables

Additionally, our study contributes a clearer understanding of how social economic status affects the level of burnout which supported the claim of Pines [25], which was individuals with higher social economic status tended to experience lower levels of burnout. What's new is that the correlation was also significant for resilience and SES. Individuals with higher level of social economic status developed a lower level of burnout and a higher level of resilience. After we categorizing the adult attachment styles in correlation analysis and regression analysis, significant correlation then occurred only in individuals who had secure attachment style. Social economic status was found positively correlated with subjective well-being [13]. And good well-being of subjects was found to promote resilience and prevent burnout [6]. Thus, individuals who have higher social economic status, which may lead to less burnout.

Education level was also found to have a strong and negative prediction on burnout among secure attachment style. This finding contradicts the statement made by Pines [25] who studied multiple cultural groups and found no correlation between educational level and burnout. However, study that investigated Malaysian ELT Practitioners from Mukundan and Khandehroo [23], pointed out that the effect of educational level on burnout was impacted by the working experiences and gender. Hence, the direct correlation between education level and burnout may not be significant since it was affected by multiple factors.

4.3. Strength & Limitation

While previous research has focused on mediating role of resilience in relation between adult attachment and other concepts such as well-being [16] and self-efficacy [2], or the impact of both attachment styles and resilience on perceived stress and coping ways [20], but not job burnout, this study provides a new insight in the field by investigating the mediation effect of resilience between the relationship of adult attachment style and burnout. Moreover, multiple of researches about burnout were studied in global range. However, only a small part of them focused on Chinese workers (see exception [10]). Our participants are Chinese workers from diverse industries (e.g., education industry, service industry and public administration industry) and aged from 18 to 63, which can be comprehensive and general interpretation among the wide range of workers in most industries in China.

Despite the strengths, the present study also has few limitations. For example, our studies analyzed the adult attachment styles as categorical variables instead of continuous variables. Hence, it cannot indicate levels in subscales of adult attachment styles. In fact, Kelly and Brennan's studies [5] on adult attachment styles contradict with Hazan and Shaver's view [12] of the three patterns of adult attachment which was adjusted into two basis dimensions and defined attachment styles into secure, preoccupied, fearful avoidant and dismissing avoidant, depend on the variation in level of anxious and avoidant dimensions. Therefore, future study should examine adult attachment styles using Kelly and Brennan' theory [5] about adult attachment styles and examine the variation in levels of participants' adult attachment styles along two dimensions.

In addition, we used a short version of "The Burnout Measure" from Pines [25-26] who measured burnout as an overall score instead of the "Maslach Burnout Inventory MBI-GS from Maslach [21], which analyzed burnout in three dimensions. Therefore, this study is unable to explore how adult attachment and resilience impact on different dimension of burnout.

Since in this study, only individual factors have been examined, for the future study, contextual factors should also be taken into account, such as occupation types. Lastly, since our study is cross-sectional, would be able to indicate causal relation, further research is needed to establish a longitudinal investigation to find out how resilience mediates the relationship between adult attachment style and burnout in long term, which can result in a more comprehensive and reliable conclusion.

4.4. Implications

The managers should take account in attachment styles to cultivate employee's resilience, identify their

attachment style and establishing the appropriate award system, to adjust their burnout in the foundation of considering different resilience scale which related to different attachment style.

5. CONCLUSION

The cross-sectional study revealed that the relationship between secure attachment and burnout was fully mediated by resilience. Social economic status, educational level as demographics characteristics can also be predictors of burnout. This finding can represent the situation of diverse industries in Chinese working population. Managements in general workplace should note the important role of different adult attachment styles plays in formation of workers' burnout which is, compared to avoidant attachment style, workers with higher secure attachment tend to develop higher resilience and result in lower burnout. For insecure attachment workers, resilience is low and more relative strategies should be carried out to lessen the high resulted burnout. Then create a more effective managements and offering sufficient and positive supports for working places.

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