



Emotional Labor and Job Burnout in the Social Work Industry — A Correlation and Regression Analysis

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Abstract. Emotional labor poses significant risks to occupational well-being, particularly for highly emotive professionals such as social workers. In this study, we explored the relationships among emotional labor, work pressure, and job burnout among registered social workers in Chengdu (N = 137). Our findings revealed a significant positive correlation between surface acting and both job stress and burnout. However, we found no significant impact of deep acting, which requires greater psychological regulation. Thus, we suggest developing emotional regulation abilities and effective social support to better cope with the effects of emotional labor. We also propose strengthening awareness education of emotional labor for social work management and practitioners, and focusing on training emotional management and care for social workers' mental health to alleviate work stress and burnout. Our insights may offer guidance for social work organizations and practitioners to effectively manage emotional labor and improve work quality.

Keywords: Emotional labor · Social work · Job stress · Burnout · Emotional regulation

1 Introduction

Within the global community, human services professionals, including social workers, face a significant amount of emotional labor that can lead to negative impacts on their occupational well-being, resulting in high levels of stress, burnout, and employee turnover rates (Soderfeldt et al., 1995 [1]; Zeng et al., 2019 [2]; Hu, 2021 [3]). In China's social work industry, there has been a concerning trend of skilled personnel leaving the field. In urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, social worker turnover rates can reach as high as 20%, prompting researchers and institutions to take action (Fang, 2015 [4]; Zeng Shouhammer et al., 2019 [5]; Huang C et al., 2022 [6]; Liu Z, Wonget al., 2022 [7]).

This presents a crucial question: what strategies can effectively reduce high turnover rates and sustain this critical profession? It's important to note that social workers predominantly serve vulnerable populations facing acute adversity, subjecting themselves to a range of negative and challenging emotions (Ma, 2002 [8]). As a result, social

workers may resort to suppressing their true emotions to present feelings consistent with their clients' needs, leading to a higher degree of emotional labor that could affect their well-being (Sandra Dwyer, 2007 [9]; Cecilie K et al., 2015 [10]). Extensive literature already indicates emotional labor as a significant cause of burnout and attrition among social workers (Kim H et al., 2011 [11]; Vilelas JM et al., 2014 [12]; Chul-Young Roh et al., 2015 [13]; Martínez-López et al., 2021 [14]). Therefore, high-intensity emotional labor seems to be a direct path to professional exhaustion. Job burnout among social workers has become an increasingly pressing issue in China. However, few studies have examined the factors that influence the relationships among emotional labor, job-related stress, and job burnout among Chinese social workers. This study aims to explore this relationship through a sample of Chinese social workers in Chengdu, China. We hope that the findings from this study could enrich our understanding of the factors affecting job burnout and alleviate issues regarding job burnout among Chinese social workers, ultimately promoting sustained and stable development of the social work industry in China.

2 Emotional Labor

Emotional labor represents the process whereby employees modify their authentic feelings in the workplace to regulate their emotional expressions, ultimately enhancing work efficiency, client satisfaction, and a sense of responsibility, all in pursuit of organizational objectives. (Grandey, 2000 [15]) Ashforth and Humphrey defined emotional labor as “displaying appropriate emotional behavior at work,” primarily focusing on the relationship between emotion management and impression management, as well as the impact of emotional expression on work or outcomes (Ashforth et al., 1993 [16]). Hochschild, on the other hand, emphasizes personal inner experiences in emotional labor, asserting that it can, in fact, be commodified, and distinguishes between two emotion regulation strategies: surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2000 [15]; Brotheridge et al., 2002 [17]; Hochschild, 2003 [18]).

Surface acting refers to employees deliberately concealing or suppressing their true emotions to align with organizational expectations. For example, amidst the escalating anxiety and fear induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers must project a calm and professional demeanor, conveying their care and support through surface-level emotions while coordinating and managing clients' situations—even if this requires masking their own apprehensions and unease (Bern-Klug M et al., 2020 [19]; Morley G et al., 2020 [20];).

However, such behavior often leads to exhaustion and tension for social workers, as they are unable to genuinely express their emotions. It is worth emphasizing that social workers have been frequently involved in more severe emotional labor behaviors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Choi et al., 2022 [21]; Wen J et al., 2023 [22]). As surface acting persists, employees may grapple with immense work-related stress and rapidly deteriorating emotional states.

Deep acting, conversely, involves self-induced “authentic” emotions, in which perceptions are altered to access and express genuinely experienced feelings—an intrinsic psychological regulatory process (Ashforth et al., 1993 [16]; Brotheridge et al., 2002

[17]). A more profound alignment between inner experiences and facial expressions is achieved through deep acting. By harmonizing external displays and internal emotional experiences, work stress can be alleviated, and employee burnout significantly reduced.

Drawing from the theories of surface and deep acting, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1)

The surface acting dimension of emotional labor has a positive correlation with work stress;

Hypothesis 2 (H2)

The deep acting dimension of emotional labor has a negative correlation with work stress;

Hypothesis 3 (H3)

The surface acting dimension of emotional labor has a positive impact on work burnout;

Hypothesis 4 (H4)

The deep acting dimension of emotional labor has a negative impact on work burnout.

3 Occupational Burnout

The phenomenon of occupational burnout, first proposed by American psychologist Freudenberger in 1974, refers to a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that is experienced by professionals in helping industries as a result of prolonged and intense job demands (Freudenberger, 1974 [23]). Often characterized by feelings of fatigue, powerlessness, and general weariness, burnout is generally associated with high levels of occupational stress and large workloads (Friganović et al., 2019 [24]; Izdebski et al., 2023 [25]). Maslach and Jackson further define occupational burnout as a comprehensive syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal stressors at work, leading to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decline in personal accomplishment (Jackson et al., 1986 [27]; Maslach et al., 2016 [26]). Emotional exhaustion encompasses feelings of helplessness and the inability to meet emotional demands at work; depersonalization refers to indifferent and negative attitudes towards work subjects or environments, along with the gradual loss of empathy and respect; while a decline in personal accomplishment signifies a loss of confidence and satisfaction in one's abilities and achievements, culminating in the inability to meet anticipated goals.

Most Chinese scholars conducting research on job burnout adopt Maslach's definition and maintain that factors such as heavy workloads, inadequate job recognition, and high work pressure are among the most common causes of burnout experienced by social workers (An, 2010 [29]; Sun et al., 2017 [30]; Tan, 2017 [31]). Burnout has been shown to significantly and positively predict turnover rates (Mor Barak et al., 2001 [32]). Job burnout can trigger feelings of anxiety and produce stress in social workers, gradually depleting their physical and mental energy, and negatively impacts the overall physical and mental health of social workers (Durham, 1992 [33]; Shapiro et al., 2010 [34]). Therefore, it is vital to investigate the factors that contribute to burnout among Chinese social workers.

Drawing on Malsach's (1986) perspective, this study conceptualizes occupational burnout among social workers is conceptualized as comprising three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, negative work attitude, and reduced sense of achievement. Moreover, Sohn's (2018) recent empirical work revealed a close association between surface acting - an emotional labor dimension that pertains to the expression of emotions that may not feel genuine - and the emergence of job burnout (Sohn, 2018 [28]). Specifically, organizational demands for emotional expression, which necessitate conformity to emotional displays that may be dissonant with inner emotions, are likely to engender unpleasant feelings in employees, thereby facilitating the development of job burnout. Guided by this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 (H5)

Subdimensions of emotional labor are correlated with work burnout;

Hypothesis 6 (H6)

Each subdimension of emotional labor has a positive impact on the subdimensions of work burnout.

4 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress refers to a state of psychological and physiological tension experienced by employees when they perceive a mismatch between job demands and their own capabilities in the workplace (Rosenthal et al., 2011 [35]; Quick et al., 2016 [36];). Moreover, occupational stress is a double-edged sword (Silva et al., 2021 [37]). On one hand, it can stimulate employees' work enthusiasm and improve work efficiency, while on the other hand, it can have negative effects on employees' physical and mental health, overall well-being, organizational performance, and staff stability. Prolonged exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems, manifesting primarily as helplessness, anxiety, dejection, and depression, among other emotional symptoms. Severe stress can cause occupational burnout and trigger further psychological issues, ultimately impacting one's physical health. If left untreated for extended periods, these issues may even lead to other organic diseases, Comparable outcomes of work-related stress have been documented in studies conducted in other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States (Woidneck et al., 2013 [38]; Prudenzi et al., 2022 [39]; Ye B et al., 2022 [40]).

Maslach points out that social workers encounter unique job-related stressors within their profession, potentially leading to emotional depletion and career stagnation, often more significant than the stress experienced by individuals working in many other organizations. When compared to workers in other fields, healthcare and geriatric social workers have demonstrated higher levels of psychological stress, including symptoms related to burnout, anxiety, depression, and arousal (Waszkowska et al., 2014 [41]; Yada et al., 2016 [42]; Li et al., 2022 [43];). Presently, academic researchers primarily focus on the negative consequences of occupational stress, with excessive emotional labor regarded as one of the contributing factors to the growth of work stress. The surface acting and deep acting dimensions of emotional labor impose varying degrees of pressure on employee behavior (Sohn et al., 2018 [28]). Thus, we propose the hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7 (H7)

There exists a correlation between the subdimensions of emotional labor and occupational stress.

5 Measures

This study employed a convenient survey method to conduct a questionnaire survey targeting professional social workers in Chengdu, China. Participants were recruited from ten social work organizations in the city, and only those who met the inclusion criteria of having worked as registered social workers for at least six months and voluntarily participated in the study were selected. The data collection period lasted for nearly two months, from January 2023 to March 2023. Out of the 140 questionnaires distributed, 137 were returned, with a response rate of 97.86%. Three questionnaires were deemed invalid due to missing data. The questionnaire was designed with four core parts, including basic information, an emotional labor scale, a work stress scale, and a work burnout scale. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, established and recognized scales were referenced and adapted.

The emotional labor scale utilized in this study was developed by Grandey, which assesses emotional labor and is divided into two sub-dimensions: surface acting (7 items) and deep acting (5 items) (Cable, 2002 [44]). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The sum of scores for each item constituted the total score for the scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of emotional labor. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for surface acting was 0.854, and for deep acting was 0.853, indicating good reliability. For the measurement of work stress, the study mainly referenced the Occupational Stress Inventory developed by Kim et al. (1996), which consists of 16 items.

Burnout was assessed in this study by utilizing the Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS). The scale demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.85 (Edwards, 1996 [45]; Cable et al., 2002 [44]). The MBI-GS includes three dimensions to measure work burnout, which are emotional exhaustion (5 items, $\alpha = 0.914$), depersonalization (4 items, $\alpha = 0.915$), and reduced personal accomplishment (6 items, $\alpha = 0.913$). A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 6 was applied to the questionnaire, with 0 denoting "never" and 6 indicating "every day".

In this study, written consent was obtained from all participants and their respective institutions, and measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the surveyed individuals. Participation in the survey was voluntary. The study adhered to institutional guidelines as well as Chinese national legal and regulatory requirements. As the study solely involved a questionnaire survey and did not involve minors, human clinical trials, or animal experiments, ethical approval was deemed unnecessary.

6 Results

6.1 Profiles of the Respondents

According to the frequency analysis results in Table 1, among the 137 respondents in this study, 51.1% were male and 48.9% were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution in this research. In terms of age, the respondents were primarily

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the sample

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	70	51.1
Female	67	48.9
Age		
20–29 years	45	32.8
30–39 years	56	40.9
40–49 years	29	21.2
50 years and above	7	5.1
Education		
High school or below	18	13.1
Junior college	50	36.5
Bachelor's degree	55	40.1
Master's degree or above	14	10.2
Work experience		
1–5 years	62	45.3
6–10 years	40	29.2
11–15 years	24	17.5
16 years and above	11	8.0

concentrated in the 20–39 age range, with 32.8% aged 20–29, and 40.9% aged 30–39. Additionally, 21.2% were aged 40–49, and 5.1% were aged 50 and above. Regarding the education level of the respondents, a higher proportion had associate's and bachelor's degrees, accounting for 36.5% and 40.1%, respectively. Those with high school or lower education and those with postgraduate or higher degrees accounted for 13.1% and 10.2% respectively. In terms of work experience, respondents with 1–5 years of experience had the highest proportion, reaching 45.3% while those with 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and 16 or more years of experience accounted for 29.2%, 17.5%, and 8.0%, respectively. In summary, this research sample adequately covers multiple aspects of social workers' gender, age, education level, and work experience, demonstrating a certain degree of representativeness.

6.2 Analysis of Research on Emotional Labor

Table 2 Descriptive analysis of emotional labor indicator's data elucidates the prevalence of emotional labor within the social work industry. Considering the overall mean values of the two dimensions, the average level of emotional labor stands at 3.61. This calculation employs a Likert five-point scoring method, with the mean value nestled between 3 and 4, signifying that respondents hold a higher proportion of "neutral" and

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of emotional labor indicators

Dimension	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Deep acting	137	3.72	0.849
Surface acting	137	3.50	0.899
Average	137	3.61	0.874

Note: N refers to the number of participants in the study. The mean represents the average score for each dimension, while the standard deviation indicates the degree of variability in the data.

“somewhat agree” options. This demonstrates the presence of emotional labor to some extent in their line of work. Additionally, with a total standard deviation of 0.874 for emotional labor, a relatively small gap exists between the survey data and the average value. The deviation from the mean is also relatively minor, indicating a comparatively stable and pervasive degree of emotional labor among respondents.

6.3 Analysis of the Correlation Between Sub-dimensions of Emotional Labor and Job Stress and Burnout

In this investigation, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the association between the two sub-dimensions of emotional labor and job stress and burnout among social workers. The results are presented in Table 3. As seen, the surface acting behavior of emotional labor exhibits a significant positive correlation with job stress and burnout at levels above 0.05, with correlation coefficients of 0.752 and 0.727, respectively. Conversely, the correlation between deep acting behavior of emotional labor and job stress and burnout is not significant, with correlation coefficients of -0.769 and -0.749 . These findings partially validate Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 7.

6.4 Regression Analysis of the Impact of Sub-dimensions of Emotional Labor on Job Stress and Burnout

Regression analysis serves as a quantitative statistical method for discerning whether dependencies exist between two or more variables. In order to study the impact of emotional labor on job stress, this section employs surface acting and deep acting as independent variables, with job stress as the dependent variable. Table 4 clearly reveals that the standardized regression coefficient (Beta) value for the surface acting dimension is 0.435, with a significance level of 0.005 ($P < 0.01$), indicating a significant positive correlation between surface acting in emotional labor and job stress, thus verifying hypothesis H1. The standardized regression coefficient (Beta) value for the deep acting dimension is -0.506 , with a significance level of 0.078 and $P > 0.05$, suggesting that there is no significant relationship between deep acting and job stress; therefore, hypothesis H2 is not supported.

To examine the influence of emotional labor on job burnout, this study used job burnout as the dependent variable and the two sub-dimensions of emotional labor as independent variables. The analysis results are presented in Table 5. As seen in Table 4,

Table 3. Correlation analysis between two sub-dimensions of emotional labor and work pressure and job burnout

Dimension	Work pressure	Job burnout
Deep acting		
Pearson Correlation	-0.769**	-0.749**
Sig (2-tailed)	0.163	0.831
N	137	137
Surface acting		
Pearson Correlation	0.752**	0.727**
Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.021
N	137	137

Notes: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). N refers to the number of participants in the study. Work pressure and job burnout are two variables measured in this study, while deep acting and surface acting are two sub-dimensions of emotional labor. The correlation coefficients represent the strength and direction of the linear relationship between these variables.

Table 4. Regression analysis of emotional labor sub-dimensions and work pressure

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(constant)	61.738	5.473		11.282	0.035
	Deep acting	-8.510	1.029	-0.506	-8.263	0.078
	Surface acting	6.950	0.972	0.435	7.150	0.005

Notes: a. Dependent variable: work pressure.

the standardized regression coefficient (Beta) for the surface acting dimension is 0.418 with a significance level below 0.05, indicating a significant positive influence of surface acting on job burnout, thereby validating Hypothesis H3. The standardized regression coefficient (Beta) for the deep acting dimension is -0.492, with a P-value of 0.077 (P > 0.05), demonstrating that deep acting has no significant effect on job burnout, and therefore, Hypothesis H4 is not supported.

6.5 Regression Analysis of the Impact of Sub-dimensions of Emotional Labor on Sub-dimensions of Job Burnout

To delve into the impact of the sub-dimensions of emotional labor on job burnout, this study employed regression analysis with the three dimensions of occupational burnout among social workers (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal

Table 5. Regression analysis of emotional labor sub-dimensions and job burnout

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(constant)	69.310	8.273		8.372	0.000
	Deep acting	-11.732	1.563	-0.492	-7.504	0.077
	Surface acting	9.350	1.467	0.418	6.375	0.000

Notes: a. Dependent variable: job burnout.

Table 6. Regression analysis of emotional labor sub-dimensions and job burnout sub-dimensions

Coefficients ^a				
Model		Beta		
		emotional exhaustion	negative work attitude	low sense of achievement
1	Deep acting	-0.475	-0.572	-0.392
	Surface acting	0.420	0.210	0.505

accomplishment) as dependent variables, and the two dimensions of emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting) as independent variables. Table 6 presents the analysis results. The Beta values for the surface acting and deep acting dimensions on the three sub-dimensions of job burnout are 0.420 and -0.475; 0.210 and -0.572; 0.505 and -0.392, respectively. Based on the comprehensive results, the following conclusions can be drawn: surface acting in emotional labor is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, negative work attitude, and low achievement feelings. The deep acting of emotional labor does not significantly affect the sub-dimensions of job burnout. Hence, it can be concluded that Hypothesis H6 is partially supported.

7 Suggest

7.1 Enhancing Social Workers' Emotional Regulation Abilities and Effective Social Support

Through correlation and regression analyses, the study found that the surface acting dimension of emotional labor is related to both work stress and job burnout, and has a positive impact on both. This indicates that the longer social workers engage in surface acting behavior, the more they feel an increase in work stress and burnout.

Social workers need to perform a substantial amount of surface emotional labor in their work to meet the expectations of service recipients or organizations. Engaging in this emotional labor for extended periods can lead to increased psychological and

physiological strain, emotional imbalance, and unstable mood fluctuations. As a result, social workers are prone to experiencing work stress and burnout, characterized by feelings of being monitored and controlled by authority and a sense of loss of autonomy and discretion.

To address this situation, social workers can use emotion management and coping strategies to alleviate work stress and burnout. For instance, they can take proactive measures such as engaging in appropriate physical activities and seeking social support to relieve work stress. At the same time, they can enhance their sense of self-identity and achievement by formulating professional plans and personal growth goals, thereby mitigating work stress and job burnout.

7.2 Strengthening the Awareness Education of Emotional Labor for Social Work Management and Practitioners

This study explores the impact of emotional labor among social workers on work stress and job burnout. The results reveal that there is no significant correlation or influence between deep acting behavior in social workers and work stress or burnout. Deep acting refers to employees' efforts to regulate their inner experiences, mask negative emotions, and display positive emotions required by the organization, thus conforming to organizational emotional rules. Work stress and burnout only occur when the emotions required by the organization do not align with employees' inner experiences. If social workers can master deep acting strategies and ensure that their inner experiences align with the emotions required by the organization, they can better cope with work stress and burnout.

Although deep acting strategies have a positive impact on social workers' work experience, many social work organizations and social workers do not place a high emphasis on deep acting behavior. Many managers and social workers fail to recognize the impact of deep acting behavior on job satisfaction and work quality. It is recommended that social work organization managers increase their focus on deep acting behavior and strengthen awareness education regarding deep acting. This will help managers in adjusting social workers' emotional states and psychological changes.

In addition, social workers' understanding and awareness of deep acting behavior are also essential. Deep acting can help social workers maintain a positive emotional state, improve work efficiency and quality, and help them recognize the negative impact of negative emotions on their work. When faced with negative emotions, social workers can use deep acting strategies for self-regulation to alleviate negativity and better accomplish work tasks.

7.3 Focusing on the Training of Emotional Management for Social Workers and the Care for Their Psychological Health

In light of current research, deep acting in emotional labor enhances social workers' psychological adjustment levels and reduces job burnout. Social workers need to focus on emotional regulation's psychological components, including emotional awareness, emotional understanding, and the use of emotional regulation strategies, to maintain a

deep acting work state. In daily work, social workers should pay attention to the consistency between external expressions and inner genuine emotions, proactively employing deep acting strategies to reduce work stress and lower job burnout.

Organizational support is crucial for social workers' emotional management and stress relief. It is recommended that social work organizations increase training in emotional management. In pre-service training, in addition to focusing on learning professional knowledge, an emphasis should be placed on introducing emotional labor-related knowledge and cultivating social workers' mastery of emotional management methods to improve their emotional literacy. Concurrently, social work organizations should create a positive and healthy work environment, encouraging mutual support and cooperation among employees and seeking help and advice from superiors. Establishing effective incentives and reward mechanisms allows social workers to feel that their efforts and contributions are recognized, thereby stimulating their enthusiasm and passion for work.

Moreover, facing daily work pressures and challenges, social workers may experience mental health issues. To ensure their mental well-being, it is suggested that social work organizations regularly provide psychological care and counseling for social workers, training them in effective communication skills and emotional expression methods to promptly identify and address psychological problems while alleviating the burden of emotional labor.

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