
Burnout among Palestinian school counselors in Gaza Strip

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Abstract: This study determined the prevalence of burnout among Palestinian school counselors in Gaza Strip. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Self-Esteem Scale (Richardson & Benbow, 1990) questionnaire were distributed to 230 subjects, while 164 participants completed and returned the questionnaire (RR=71.30%). Participants reported high prevalence of burnout syndrome which represented as follows: 53.6% high level of Emotional Exhaustions (EE), 59.8% high level of Depersonalization (DP) and 73.8% high level of Reduced Personal Accomplishment (RPA). Positive self-esteem was correlated negatively with burnout. Results indicated significant differences in burnout due to age, experience and type of employer. Females were more burnout but did not reach significant difference. It can be concluded that Palestinian school counselors in Gaza are highly burnout. Burnout reduction program is suggested and comfortable working environment is recommended.

Keywords: Burnout, Self-Esteem, School Counselor, Gaza

1. Introduction

School counselors have many different professional roles to play, including conducting individual and group counseling and educational testing, giving advice to students on academic and career matters, and completing a growing number of administrative tasks (Shin et al, 2013; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). In some countries, school counselors provide a “guidance curriculum” to all students, organize responsive individual and group counseling for students in need, and give support to teachers and parents (Yuen, 2008).

Findings from numerous studies (Rosenberg & Pace, 2006) suggest that it is important for counselors to attend to their personal wellness to effectively serve their clients.

School counselors deliver a broad range of vital services and, thus, play a critical role in ensuring the well-being of society's most vulnerable members (Kim et al, 2011).

In Maslach model, burnout is viewed as a syndrome that consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being depleted of one's emotional resources (Maslach et al, 2001). Depersonalization refers to negative, cynical or excessively detached response to other people at work. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to feelings of decline in

one's competence and productivity and to one's lowered sense of self-efficacy (Pines & Keinan, 2005).

School counselors experiencing burnout have an increased risk of psychological distress, such as depression (Stanley et al, 2007). Burnout can negatively affect overall self-rated health status (Peterson et al, 2008) and can lead to a broad range of health problems, including somatic complaints (Soares et al, 2007); cardiovascular diseases (Melamed et al, 2006); gastrointestinal problems (Sveinsdottir et al, 2007); sleep disturbances (Grossi et al, 2003); decreased immunity (Melamed et al, 2006); headaches, flu-like illnesses and common colds (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006).

School counselor burnout is a serious problem because it can adversely affect the quality and stability of psychological and educational services. Burnout in school counselors may lead to poor services and deterioration in rapport and trust, treating others as objects, callous and cruel remarks made towards others, physical force being used and less time spent with clients, less eye contact, with workers making and taking longer breaks (Mor Barak et al, 2001).

There is an abundance of literature in relation to school counselor's burnout but nothing has been undertaken in Gaza. It is especially important to look at Gaza given the conditions in which many school counselors have to work

after the war and continuous comprehensive siege that affects all life aspects in Gaza.

2. Methods

The descriptive correlational design was used in this study. The survey was conducted from January 2014 to March 2014. The population studied comprised all school counselors in Gaza Strip. After obtaining ethical approval from the authorized administrations, the Arabic versions of questionnaire were handed to all eligible school counselors (n=230) to participate as study respondents. Participants provided their consent prior the completion of the questionnaire, after reading a summary of information regarding the purpose of the survey, and their confidentiality and anonymity were assured on at the front page. The total time required to answer the questionnaire was estimated at approximately 15 minutes.

2.1. Research Questions

2.1.1. Main Question

What is the nature of association between burnout and self-esteem among school counselors in Gaza Strip?

2.1.2. Sub-Questions

- What is the prevalence of burnout among school counselors in Gaza Strip?
- Are there any differences in the level of burnout among school counselors in Gaza associated with pertinent variables such as gender, salary, age, years of experience, type of employer and marital status?
- Is there a significant correlation between level of burnout and its dimension and level of self-esteem?

2.2. Instrument

The Arabic version of Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to measure burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). MBI is the most commonly used instrument for the measurement of burnout. It consists of 22 items assessing three components of Burnout Syndrome, namely Emotional Exhaustion (9 items), Depersonalization (5 items) and Reduced Personal Accomplishment (8 items). It asks respondents to indicate the frequency over the work year with which they have experienced each feeling on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). Low burnout: EE score 0±18, DP score 0±5, PA score 40+; Moderate burnout: EE score 19±26, DP score 6±9, PA score 34±39; High burnout: EE score 27+, DP score 10+, PA score 0±33. It should be noted that high levels of EE and DP and low levels of PA are anticipated in the individual who is burned out.

Respondents' self-esteem was measured using Arabic version of Richardson & Benbow's (1990) Self-esteem Scale consisting of the following six items: first, 'I take a positive attitude toward myself'; second, 'I feel am a person of worth, on an equal place with others'; third, 'I am able to

do things as well as most other people'; fourth, 'On the whole, I'm satisfied with myself'; fifth, 'at times I think I am no good at all'; and finally, 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of'. The scale had acceptable reliability.

2.3. Participants

Due to the small number of Palestinian school counselors, it was decided that the questionnaire should be given to all available members of the population to ensure more reliability of data. The response rate was 71.30%; 164 out of 230 school counselors returned the completed survey forms.

2.4. Data Analysis

SPSS.18 statistical system was used to analyze the data in this study. Statistical assumptions were tested prior to running the analyses, and all variables were found to satisfy the assumptions for the normal distribution, homogeneity of variance and independence of observations. In this study, reliability Coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha) of Self-esteem Scale was 0.88 and of the MBI subscales were: 0.80, 0.89, and 0.88 respectively.

3. Results

A total of 164 questionnaires were returned and females represented 54.9% respondents. Most of participants are married (70.1%), while 49.4% respondents came from UNRWA (Table 1). The average age of the sample was 33.24 years (SD=8.1), and the average monthly salary was \$685.

Table 1. General characteristics of the respondents (N = 164)

Variable	Definition	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	74	45.1
	Female	90	54.9
Employee type	UNRWA	81	49.4
	Government	64	39.0
	Others	19	11.6
Age	19-30	55	33.5
	31-40	74	45.1
	41-50	25	15.3
	51-60	10	6.1
	1-5	81	49.4
Experience	6-10	58	35.4
	11-15	15	9.1
	>15	10	6.1
Salary	<500	67	40.9
	>500	97	59.1
Marital status	Single	39	23.8
	Married	115	70.1
	Divorced/widowed	10	6.1

As shown in Table 2, about 60% (n=98) of the respondents fell into a 'high depersonalization' category, and an additional 31.1% (n=51) were in the 'average' group. More than 53% (n=88) of the respondents scored high on the emotional exhaustion subscale, and 34.8% (n=57) scored in the medium emotional exhaustion group. Of the respondents, 73.8% (n=121) scored high on the reduced personal accomplishment subscale. Only 8.5% (n=14) scored low on

this measure. It is very clear that school counselors fell into the high categories of burnout in all subscales. To sum up, 53.6, 59.8 and 73.8 percent of school counselors in Gaza who participated in this study experienced high burnout in the aspects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment respectively.

Table 2. Prevalence of burnout in school counselors

Subscale	Level	Frequency	Percentage
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	High	88	53.6
	Moderate	57	34.8
	Low	19	11.6
depersonalization (DP)	High	98	59.8
	Moderate	51	31.1
	Low	15	9.1
Reduced Personal Accomplishment (RPA)	High	121	73.8
	Moderate	29	17.7
	Low	14	8.5

The independent sample t-test output Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between males and females in MBI subscales except in PA ($P=0.031$). Obviously, but not significantly, female school counselors had higher means of emotional exhaustion (trivial effect size: 0.13) and depersonalization (trivial effect size: 0.12). Also, it shows no significant difference in all MBI subscales due to salary.

The ANOVA output Table 4 shows no significant

differences in Emotional Exhaustion due to age, experience and marital status. The only significant difference was due to employer type ($F=4.211$, $p=0.016$). Scheffe test output shows that Emotional Exhaustion is higher among school counselors employed in sectors neither governmental nor UNRWA.

The ANOVA output Table 5 shows significant differences ($F=8.683$, $p=0.001$) in Depersonalization due to age (large effect size: 0.134). Scheffe test output shows that burnout is higher among younger school counselors. It shows significant differences ($F=4.086$, $p=0.007$) in DP due to experience (medium effect size: 0.068). Scheffe test output shows that burnout is higher among school counselors with less experience. Also, it shows significant differences in DP ($F=4.070$, $p=0.018$) due to marital status (small effect size: 0.046). Scheffe test output shows that depersonalization is higher among single school counselors. No significant difference in DP was found due to employer type. The ANOVA output Table 6 shows no significant differences in Reduced Personal Accomplishment due to experience, employer type and marital status. It shows significant differences ($F=9.562$, $p=0.001$) due to age (large effect size: 0.148). Scheffe test output shows that Reduced Personal Accomplishment is higher among younger school counselors.

Table 3. Differences in MBI due to gender and salary

MBI	N	Mean	SD	t value	P	Diff-means (95% CIs)	d
EE	Male	74	27.4	-1.886	0.062	-2.2 (-4.5, 0.1)	0.13
	Female	90	29.7				
DP	Male	74	11.4	-1.446	0.151	0.6 (-2.2, 0.3)	0.12
	Female	90	12.3				
PA	Male	74	26.3	-2.162	0.031	0.7 (-3.5, -0.3)	0.16
	Female	90	28.1				
EE	<\$500	67	27.4	-1.431	0.156	-1.7 (-4.2, 0.6)	0.07
	>\$500	97	29.2				
DP	<\$500	67	12.2	0.706	0.481	0.5 (-0.9, 1.8)	0.03
	>\$500	97	11.7				
PA	<\$500	67	27.2	-0.011	0.993	-0.01 (-1.8, 1.8)	0.01
	>\$500	97	27.2				

Cohen's d (effect size): Trivial <0.20, Small 0.20-0.49, Medium 0.50-0.79, Large ≥ 0.80

Table 4. Differences in MBI-EE due to age, experience, employee type and marital status

MBI-EE	N	Mean	SD	F (df)	P	η^2
Age	<30	55	29.7	1.894 (3, 161)	0.134	0.035
	31-40	74	29.0			
	41-50	25	26.8			
	51-60	10	23.7			
Experience	1-5	81	29.4	1.667 (3, 161)	0.175	0.031
	6-10	58	28.3			
	11-15	15	25.2			
	> 15	10	25.5			
Employer type	UNRWA	81	28.4	4.211 (2, 162)	0.016	0.048
	Government	64	26.8			
	Others	19	31.6			
Marital status	Single	39	27.8	0.293 (2, 162)	0.745	0.003
	Married	115	28.8			
	Others	10	27.5			

Eta-squared (η^2) effect size: Trivial < 0.01, Small 0.01-0.05 Medium, 0.06-0.13, Large ≥ 0.14

Table 5. Differences in MBI-DP due to age, experience, employee type and marital status

	MBI-DP	N	Mean	SD	F (df)	P	η^2
Age	<30	55	12.6	3.7	8.683 (3, 161)	0.001	0.134
	31-40	74	12.6	4.2			
	41-50	25	9.8	2.8			
	51-60	10	6.7	3.4			
Experience	1-5	81	12.4	2.0	4.086 (3, 161)	0.007	0.067
	6-10	58	12.1	4.0			
	11-15	15	9.0	4.0			
	> 15	10	9.6	4.4			
Employer type	Government	81	11.1	4.2	2.954 (2, 162)	0.054	0.033
	UNRWA	64	12.7	4.2			
	Others	19	12.4	3.3			
	Single	39	13.8	3.8			
Marital status	Married	115	11.6	4.2	4.070 (2, 162)	0.018	0.045
	Others	10	10.4	2.7			

Table 6. Differences in MBI-PA due to age, experience, employer type & marital status

	MBI-PA	N	Mean	SD	F (df)	P	η^2
Age	<30	55	28.5	4.7	9.562 (3, 161)	0.001	0.148
	31-40	74	27.7	4.7			
	41-50	25	25.8	4.6			
	51-60	10	18.5	10.4			
Experience	1-5	81	28.0	4.6	2.197 (3, 161)	0.089	0.038
	6-10	58	27.0	4.9			
	11-15	15	25.8	11.0			
	> 15	10	23.7	2.9			
Employer type	UNRWA	81	26.4	5.9	1.659 (2, 162)	0.192	0.019
	Government	64	28.1	4.4			
	Others	19	27.8	5.5			
	Single	39	27.6	5.1			
Marital status	Married	115	27.3	5.4	1.236 (2, 162)	0.292	0.014
	Others	10	24.5	6.4			

Pearson Correlations Table 7 shows significant negative correlations were found between the three burnout subscales (Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Reduced Personal Accomplishment) and Self-esteem Scale. This means that the higher burnout school counselors have the lower self-esteem they get.

Table 7. Pearson Correlations between burnout and self-esteem

Measure	EE	DP	PA	SE
EE	1			
DP	0.420**	1		
PA	0.314**	0.379**	1	
SE	-0.319**	-0.237**	0.347**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4. Discussion

The results of this study showed that 53.6, 59.8 and 73.8 percent of the respondents experienced high burnout in the aspects of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Reduced Personal Accomplishment respectively. The results of the present study may be regarded as significant

indicators of the prevalence of burnout among Palestinian school counselors in Gaza Strip. The findings indicate that 53.6% of these school counselors felt that they could no longer dedicate themselves to the work they intended to do. Moreover, 73.8% of them lacked the sense of personal accomplishment in their professional careers and 59.8% had negative feelings towards their clients. This high level of burnout could be explained that specific to mental health professionals, the responsibilities to provide care for service recipients is often at the expense of their own wellness (Sangganjanavanich, Balkin, 2013). Also, it has long been noticed that qualities that make counselors effective with their clients-such as empathy, compassion, and caring-may also leave them vulnerable to burnout (Lawson et al, 2007).

When compared with other studies, the present findings suggest that school counselors in Gaza experience higher levels of burnout than those in the West Bank-Palestine who had 20% high EE, 46.7% DP and 53% RPA (Abdallah, 2009). In the other hand, level of burnout in this study is less severity than the level of burnout among social workers in Gaza (Alhajjar et al, 2012). Siebert (2005) concluded that about three-fourths of 751 participants reported having had trouble with burnout during their careers. Anderson (2000) found that about 62% of 151 frontline child protective

services (CPS) workers were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion.

Self-esteem was found to be negatively correlated with burnout. This shows the importance of paying more attention to school counselors' self-esteem and to make additional efforts to promote school counselors' sense of self-worth. It is the time to support school counselors by their administrators and supervisors especially when they work in such difficult situations in Gaza with client populations who are themselves highly stressed. This result was in line with Abdallah (2009) and Alhajjar et al (2012).

The results show that younger and less experienced school counselors tended to experience higher levels of burnout than did older and more experienced school counselors. The literature suggests that younger school counselors may have less stability and experience and tend to be more idealistic, while older school counselors tend to have more realistic expectations. Also, older school counselors are likely to be more mature and less over-identified with their clients than younger school counselors. This was similar to the findings of Abdallah (2009) and Alhajjar et al (2012). In a meta-analysis conducted by Lim et al (2010), age was the most significant indicator that predicted burnout in all three dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). Lim et al hypothesized that mental health professionals who were older and accumulated more life experience with emotional maturity may have developed more effective coping strategies that prevent them from experiencing burnout. Rosenberg & Pace (2006) indicated that younger mental health professionals are more vulnerable to burnout, possibly because of the lack of experience that only comes with age.

Results indicated that single people are more vulnerable because of less familial support. This was similar to the findings of Courage & Williams (1987). Results found that female school counselors were more burnout than males. This could be because women are more likely to be emotionally involved and dedicated. This is similar to Abdallah (2009) and Alhajjar et al (2012).

School counselors employed in institutions neither governmental nor UNRWA experienced higher burnout. This could be because of the structure of some organizations which is not clear to the researchers at the moment. This result was supported by Mor Barak et al (2001) and Alhajjar et al (2012).

5. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the researchers suggest specific plans of action in order to provide a quality work environment for school counselors. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Provide information on school counselors' level of burnout to each head of department. This may influence them in improving better work environment.

2. Prepare detailed documentation on the findings of the study as baseline information for the next studies.
3. For further understanding of burnout, more studies are needed to explore its prevalence in different occupations and social groups.
4. The unique political, social and cultural attributes of Gaza-Palestine should be considered when planning any burnout reduction program or stress management strategy.
5. Provide school counselors strong support facilities for counseling and recreational activities.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided useful information on Gaza school counselor levels of their burnout by using the MBI inventory. The study identified high level of burnout in all MBI subscales. In the next future, a focus group discussion should be performed as a follow-up to explore further the actual causes of burnout. The recommendations arising from this study include the need for a supportive environment and implementing interventions to deal with stress and burnout among school counselors in Gaza.

7. Strengths and Limitations

One of the strength of the study was the inclusion of all school counselors in Gaza. The current sample size ($n=164$) resulted in sufficient power levels to allow readers to interpret findings with reasonable assurance that the outcomes have merit. The major limitation of the study is that survey research relies on self-report and voluntary responses. It is possible that those responding were the healthiest members of the overall sample.

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