

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Relationships among humor, stress, self-esteem and social support to burnout: a study of teachers in Hong Kong

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**Relationships among Humor, Stress, Self-esteem and Social Support to Burnout:  
A Study of Teachers in Hong Kong**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher stress and burnout are world-wide issues. However, given that teaching is a “high stress” profession, teachers report different levels of burnout that is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The present study examined the four potential roles (main, moderating, direct, and indirect effects) of humor on burnout among school teachers in Hong Kong. A correlational research design was employed. Five hundred thirty nine teachers completed a battery of self-report measures on teacher stress, humor, self-esteem, social support, and burnout.

This study sought to ascertain if humor exerts a main effect on burnout components, over and above the effects of demographic/background variables and stress. The study also aimed to explore the possible “moderating effects” of humor on the stress-burnout relationship. In addition, it was proposed that humor influenced burnout indirectly, through the mediating effects of self-esteem and social support. In line with previous research, results showed that teachers scoring high on affiliative and self-enhancing humor experienced less emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and perceived more personal accomplishment in their work. The findings indicated that adaptive styles of humor predict burnout components differentially. However, contrary to expectation, moderated multiple regression analyses revealed no evidence that either affiliative or self-enhancing humor moderates the impact of teacher stress on any burnout components. These findings also suggested that self-esteem consistently explained parts of the associations between affiliative/self-enhancing humor and burnout components, whereas perceived social support from principal, colleagues, and friends were significant mediators in the relationship between affiliative/self-enhancing humor and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment respectively.

These results provided support for the Relief/Psychoanalytic, Incongruity, Superiority, and Interpersonal Relationship theories of humor since both affiliative and self-enhancing humor were found to differentially associate with the burnout components, self-esteem and social support in the predicted directions. Results also lent support to the Conservation of Resources (COR) model of burnout, highlighting the importance of self-esteem and social support in easing burnout. However, the findings did not provide support to the Transactional model of occupational stress in that neither affiliative nor self-enhancing humor moderated the stress-burnout relationships in this sample.

Limitations and contributions of the present findings are discussed. Avenues for future research and suggestions for schools are also offered, calling for an appropriate focus on the development of humor through strength-based and positive interventions to help teachers cope with the experience of burnout.

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