

DOCTORAL THESIS

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

Ho, Sai Kin

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

HO Sai Kin

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

Principal Supervisor: Dr. CHIK Pik Yuk, Maria

Hong Kong Baptist University

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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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION -----	i
ABSTRACT -----	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT -----	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS -----	iv
LIST OF TABLES -----	x
LIST OF FIGURES -----	xii

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information -----	1
1.2 Humor as a Coping Strategy -----	4
1.3 Self Esteem and Social Support as Mediators -----	5
1.4 Purpose of Study -----	7
1.5 Significance and Rationale of the Study -----	7
1.6 Summary -----	9
1.7 Presentation of Chapters -----	9

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Nature and Components of Humor -----	10
2.2 Theories of Humor -----	15
2.2.1 Relief and Psychoanalytic Theories -----	17
2.2.2 Superiority and Disparagement Theories -----	18
2.2.3 Incongruity Theory -----	19
2.2.4 Interpersonal Relationship and Communication Theories -----	21
2.2.5 Summary -----	23
2.3 Measures of Sense of Humor -----	24
2.3.1 Sense of Humor Questionnaire (SHQ) and its Revision (SHQ-6/-3) ----	26

2.3.2	Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ) -----	30
2.3.3	Coping Humor Scale (CHS) -----	31
2.3.4	Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) -----	33
2.3.5	State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory (STCI) -----	37
2.3.6	Sense of Humor Scale (SHS) -----	39
2.3.7	Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) -----	41
2.4	Gender and Age Differences in Humor -----	49
2.5	Humor and Mental Health: Empirical Research -----	53
2.5.1	Humor as a Coping Mechanism -----	53
2.5.2	Humor as an Expression and Enhancement of Self-Esteem -----	58
2.5.3	Humor as a Socially Facilitative Mechanism -----	60
2.5.4	Humor and Burnout -----	62
2.5.5	Chinese Sense of Humor -----	64
2.6	Teacher Stress and Burnout -----	69
2.6.1	The Hong Kong Context -----	69
2.6.2	Models/Approaches of Work Stress for Teachers -----	70
2.6.2.1	Engineering/Stimulus-Based Model -----	71
2.6.2.2	Physiological/Response-Based Model -----	72
2.6.2.3	Transactional/Psychological Model -----	75
2.6.2.4	Summary -----	79
2.6.3	Prevalence of Teacher Stress -----	79
2.6.4	Measurement and Sources of Teacher Stress -----	81
2.6.4.1	Teacher Stress Measure (TSM) -----	82
2.6.4.2	Teacher Stress Inventory (TSI) -----	82
2.6.4.3	Occupational Stress Inventory (OSI) and its Revision (OSI-R) -----	84
2.6.4.4	Teacher Stress Questionnaire (TSQ) -----	85
2.6.4.5	Job-Related Stress Questionnaire (JRSQ) -----	88
2.6.4.6	Teacher Stress Scale (TSS) and its Short Form (TSS-SF) -	88
2.6.4.7	Teacher Occupational Stress Questionnaire (TOSQ) -----	89
2.6.4.8	Chinese Teacher Stress Questionnaire (CTSQ) -----	90
2.6.4.9	Sources of Teacher Stress Questionnaire (STSQ)-----	90
2.6.4.10	Chinese Teacher Stress Inventory (CTSI) -----	91
2.6.4.11	Sources of Teacher Stress Measure (STSM) -----	91

2.6.4.12	Summary	92
2.6.5	Historical Development of the Burnout Concept	96
2.6.5.1	The Pioneering Phase	97
2.6.5.2	The Empirical Phase	99
2.6.6	Model/Perspectives, Definitions and Measurement of Burnout	100
2.6.6.1	A Clinical Perspective	101
2.6.6.2	A Social Psychological Perspective	102
2.6.6.3	An Existential Perspective	108
2.6.6.4	An Organizational Perspective	114
2.6.6.5	A Sociological Perspective	128
2.6.6.6	Summary	130
2.6.7	Teacher Stress and Burnout: Empirical Research	132
2.6.8	Demographic/Background Variables and Teacher Stress/Burnout	134
2.7	Theoretical Perspectives of the Present Study	139
2.8	Research Objectives	142
2.9	Hypotheses	143
2.10	Conclusion	144

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

3.1	Research Design	146
3.2	Research Methods	146
3.3	Data Analysis	146
3.4	Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Constructs	150
3.4.1	Sense of Humor	150
3.4.2	Teacher Stress	151
3.4.3	Burnout	152
3.4.4	Self-Esteem	152
3.4.5	Social Support	153
3.4.6	Social Desirability	153
3.5	Research Procedures	154
3.6	Summary	154

CHAPTER FOUR PILOT STUDY – AIMS, PROCEDURES, RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction ----- 156

4.2 The First Phase ----- 156

 4.2.1 Participants and Procedures ----- 157

 4.2.2 Results

 4.2.2.1 Chinese Humor Styles Questionnaire – Revised (CHSQ-R) -157

 4.2.2.2 Chinese Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (CMSHS) -----159

 4.2.2.3 Convergent and Discriminant Validity of the CHSQ-R and CMSHS -----163

 4.2.2.4 The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – Chinese Version (MSPSS-C) ----- 165

4.3 The Second Phase ----- 169

 4.3.1 Participants and Procedures ----- 169

 4.3.2 Results ----- 169

4.4 The Third Phase ----- 173

 4.4.1 Participants and Procedures ----- 174

 4.4.2 Results ----- 175

 4.4.2.1 Chinese Teacher Stress Questionnaire (CTSQ)(26-item) ----175

 4.4.2.2 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – Chinese Version (RSES-C) -180

 4.4.2.3 Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES)-180

 4.4.2.4 Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale – Brief Form C (M-C Form C) ----- 180

 4.4.2.5 Initial Relationships between Positive Humor Styles and Burnout ----- 181

4.5 Summary -----182

CHAPTER FIVE MAIN STUDY – PROCEDURES AND RESULTS

5.1 Procedures -----183

5.2 Screening and Cleaning the Data ----- 183

5.3	Participants	185
5.4	Instruments	185
5.4.1	Chinese Teacher Stress Questionnaire (CTSQ)	185
5.4.2	Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale – Brief Form C (M-C Form C)	188
5.4.3	Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – Chinese Version (RSES-C)	189
5.4.4	Chinese Humor Styles Questionnaire – Revised (CHSQ-R)	189
5.4.5	The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – Chinese Version Revised (MSPSS-CR)	189
5.4.6	Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES)	191
5.5	Demographic Variables and Burnout Components	193
5.6	Descriptive Data and Correlational Analysis	195
5.7	Moderated Multiple Regression (MMR) Analyses for Burnout Components	198
5.7.1	Main and Moderation Effects of Affiliative Humor	199
5.7.1.1	Hypothesis 1a – Affiliative Humor and Emotional Exhaustion	199
5.7.1.2	Hypothesis 1b – Affiliative Humor and Depersonalization	201
5.7.1.3	Hypothesis 1c – Affiliative Humor and Personal Accomplishment	201
5.7.1.4	Hypothesis 1 Summary - Main Effects of Affiliative Humor	202
5.7.1.5	Hypothesis 2 – Moderation Effects of Affiliative Humor	202
5.7.2	Main and Moderation Effects of Self-Enhancing Humor	202
5.7.2.1	Hypothesis 1a – Self-Enhancing Humor and Emotional Exhaustion	204
5.7.2.2	Hypothesis 1b – Self-Enhancing Humor and Depersonalization	204
5.7.2.3	Hypothesis 1c – Self-Enhancing Humor and Personal Accomplishment	204
5.7.2.4	Hypothesis 1 Summary - Main Effects of Self-Enhancing Humor	205
5.7.2.5	Hypothesis 2 – Moderation Effects of Self-Enhancing Humor	205
5.7.3	Summary of Hypotheses 1 and 2	205
5.8	Mediation Analyses	206

5.8.1	Hypothesis 3a - Affiliative Humor and Emotional Exhaustion -----	206
5.8.2	Hypothesis 3b - Affiliative Humor and Depersonalization -----	208
5.8.3	Hypothesis 3c - Affiliative Humor and Personal Accomplishment -----	209
5.8.4	Hypothesis 3a - Self-Enhancing Humor and Emotional Exhaustion ----	210
5.8.5	Hypothesis 3b - Self-Enhancing Humor and Depersonalization -----	212
5.8.6	Hypothesis 3c - Self-Enhancing Humor and Personal Accomplishment	213
5.8.7	Summary of Hypothesis 3 -----	214
5.9	Conclusion -----	217

CHAPTER SIX MAIN STUDY – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1	Hypothesis 1 – Main Effects of Humor on Burnout -----	218
6.2	Hypothesis 2 – Moderation Effects of Humor on Burnout -----	221
6.3	Hypothesis 3 – Direct and Indirect Effects of Humor on Burnout -----	224
6.4	Contribution of the Study -----	227
6.5	Limitations and Recommendations -----	229
6.6	Implication for Future Directions -----	231
6.6.1	A Positive Antithesis of Burnout and Maladaptive Humor -----	231
6.6.2	Sense of Humor as an Intervention Focus -----	232
6.7	Conclusion -----	233

REFERENCES -----	234
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Pilot Study Questionnaires (Phase 1) -----	280
Appendix 2	Pilot Study Questionnaires (Phase 2) -----	286
Appendix 3	Pilot Study Questionnaires (Phase 3) -----	294
Appendix 4	Invitation Letter to Principal for the Main Study -----	304
Appendix 5	Main Study Questionnaires -----	305
Appendix 6	Confirmation Letter to Principal for the Main Study -----	317

CURRICULUM VITAE -----	318
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