Burnout Among Manufacturing Workers in China: The Effects of Organizational Socialization and Leadership Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between organizational socialization (Training, Understanding, Coworker Support, and Future Prospects) and leadership behavior (Monitor, Producer, Consideration for Others, and Trust in Others) and burnout (Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment) were explored and discussed. Data were collected from 341 Chinese manufacturing workers in Southern China. Results revealed that organizational socialization was highly and negatively correlated with Emotional Exhaustion, but highly and positively with Personal Accomplishment. Monitor, Consideration, and Trust were highly and negatively correlated with Emotional Exhaustion, but all the four leadership behaviors were highly and positively correlated with Personal Accomplishment. Regression revealed Training and Monitor to be significant predictors of Emotional Exhaustion, and Understanding, Coworker Support, and Trust explained significant variance of Personal Accomplishment. Management implications are discussed, and future research is indicated.

Keywords: Burnout, Chinese Manufacturing, Leadership Behavior, Organizational Socialization, Worker

INTRODUCTION

Deaths at Foxconn shocked China and the whole world! Even though the company claimed that the deaths were not work-related, families of the deceased have blamed the punishing work schedules in China’s factories. The deaths have sparked wider concerns about working conditions in China and drawn attention to the growing labor movement on the mainland. Long working hours, discrimination of mainland Chinese workers by their Taiwanese coworkers,

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and a lack of working relationships have all been reported as potential causes.

While most research on burnout has focused on “people” workers (especially nurses), little research has examined employees in other industries. There have been some studies on how to deal with occupational stress (Burke, 2010), only a few investigated manufacturing workers. Despite the large number of people working in the manufacturing industry, most empirical research focused on performance efficiency (Fugate, Mentzer, & Stank, 2010) and effectiveness (Rhea & Shrock, 1987), revealing a missing gap in research on the psychological characteristics and attitudes of manufacturing workers.

This research, therefore, focused on burnout and organizational factors in relation to manufacturing workers in China. Specially, organizational socialization and leadership behaviors were examined in relation to two burnout facets of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment.

**Burnout**

The concept of “Burnout” was introduced in the mid-1970s by Herbert Freudenberger (1974). He observed symptoms of emotional depletion and a loss of motivation and commitment among volunteers who were working in an alternative health care agency. Around the same time, Maslach (1976) studied emotions in the workplace. She interviewed a wide range of human services workers about the emotional stress caused by their jobs. Therefore, burnout research began in care-giving and service occupations.

Although several definitions have been developed, the most widely accepted definition of burnout is Maslach and Jackson’s (1981) three-component conceptualization (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), i.e., burnout is “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (p. 99). The three key dimensions are: (1) emotional exhaustion; (2) depersonalization; and (3) reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources. Depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one’s feeling of competence and a lack of achievement and productivity at work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). This three-factor model of burnout indicates that burnout is not only an individual stress experience, which is mainly explained by emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, it also affects one’s social relationships at work, i.e., depersonalization: Negative evaluations of other people (Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 1999).

The most widely used self-report measure of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). The original MBI was generally designed for use in human service occupations. Accordingly, the three subscales of the MBI (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) were intended mainly for employees who work closely with people and their problems, e.g., nurses, police, and teachers.

Two facets of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were used for this study, as the target respondents were manufacturing workers who, technically speaking, do not involve in “people work”, but rather, with machines or materials. Thus, depersonalization was not assessed in this study.

**Organizational Socialization**

Taormina (1994) suggested that organizational socialization has four content domains, namely: (1) “training,” which refers to the development of job-related skills and abilities; (2) “understanding,” that is the ability to apply knowledge about the nature, significance, or explanation of the various aspects of what goes on in the workplace; (3) “coworker support,” which refers to the emotional, moral, or instrumental sustenance that is provided (without financial compensation) by other employees in the organization; and (4) “future prospects,” which
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