

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL LABOR AND OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT AMONG UNIVERSITY MENTAL HEALTH TEACHERS

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between emotional labor and occupational burnout among university mental health teachers. Due to the nature of their work, university mental health educators engage in significant emotional labor, which, if not properly managed, can easily lead to occupational burnout. Emotional labor leads to occupational burnout by depleting psychological resources: surface acting positively predicts occupational burnout; deep acting may alleviate burnout through positive feedback, but long-term emotional regulation still carries the risk of implicit exhaustion; natural emotional expression negatively impacts burnout, but is difficult to achieve in the high-pressure environment of mental health teachers. Mental health educators abroad and those in China operate in different contexts and employ distinct methods, rendering foreign research of limited relevance. Currently, there is a scarcity of studies in China examining the relationship between emotional labor and occupational burnout among mental health educators. This paper compiles domestic and international literature using a systematic review approach and provides a critical evaluation of existing research. It offers valuable insights for improving the current state of occupational burnout among university mental health educators and cultivating their ability to effectively utilize emotional labor strategies.

**Keywords:** Mental Health Teachers, Emotional Labor, Occupational Burnout

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## INTRODUCTION

University mental health work faces multifaceted challenges and pressures, with mental health teachers operating within a work environment characterized by broad responsibilities, high competency requirements, and significant pressure. According to the “Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Higher Education Institutions”, mental health teachers are tasked with a “four-pronged responsibility” encompassing teaching and education, counseling, promotional activities, and preventive intervention, in addition to research and administrative duties. This creates a high-load, high-risk work environment, necessitating that mental health teachers develop into “jack-of-all-trades” professionals. They must possess solid teaching skills to deliver public and elective courses related to mental health; engage in specialized training and ongoing supervision to maintain counseling proficiency for individual and group counseling; demonstrate academic research capabilities for career advancement, organizational planning skills for event management, and coordination abilities for club administration; and possess communication skills to interact with departments or parents and handle administrative tasks. In terms of crisis intervention, epidemiological data statistics show that the incidence of depression is on the rise, with a trend toward younger age groups and more severe cases, and it is characterized by difficulty in detection, treatment, and high recurrence rates (Zhao et al., 2024). Although a four-tier warning system has been established at the school, department, class, and dormitory levels, a system that relies on grassroots identification carries the risk of delayed response, placing the ultimate burden of assessment and intervention on mental health teachers. Chinese universities generally emphasize proactive intervention, and if there are communication barriers or uncooperative parents, this inevitably places significant pressure on mental health teachers (Li & Yang, 2020). Additionally, the principle of “ensuring student safety” as the highest priority means that mental health teachers face extremely high responsibility risks in crises, and any mistakes may result in accountability. Furthermore, in terms of personal professional development, the contradiction between improving counseling skills and heavy workloads, the difficulty of achieving promotion in a high-pressure, multi-task environment, and resource allocation issues collectively contribute to the work pressure faced by mental health teachers. Without clear job boundaries, strong professional support, and comprehensive safeguards, mental health teachers are prone to burnout and emotional exhaustion, leading to occupational fatigue. This paper reviews relevant research on emotional labor and occupational burnout among teachers both domestically and internationally, clarifies their connotations and the relationship between the two, and provides a theoretical basis for improving the current state of occupational burnout among university mental health teachers and cultivating their ability to reasonably apply emotional labor strategies.

## LITERATURE SEARCH METHODOLOGY

To ensure transparency and reproducibility, a systematic literature search was conducted following the principles of a scoping review. The following databases were searched: CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search covered the period from January 2000 to March 2025 to capture both foundational and recent developments. The search strings combined keywords related to emotional labor (“emotional labor” OR “emotion work” OR “情绪劳动”), occupational burnout (“burnout” OR “occupational burnout” OR “职业倦怠”), and the target population (“university teachers” OR “college teachers” OR “mental health teachers” OR “psychological counselors” OR “高校教师” OR “心理教师”). Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search. Inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles or doctoral dissertations; (2) studies published in English or Chinese; (3) empirical studies or systematic reviews that explicitly examined emotional labor and/or occupational burnout among teachers (with a preference for higher education contexts). Exclusion criteria were: (1) conference abstracts, book chapters, or

opinion pieces without empirical data; (2) studies focusing on non-teaching professions or primary/secondary school teachers exclusively; (3) duplicate publications or studies with insufficient methodological quality (e.g., very small sample size, lack of validated measures). After removing duplicates and screening titles/abstracts, full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. A total of XX studies were finally included in this review (a PRISMA flow diagram can be provided upon request). This methodology ensures that the literature selection is systematic and minimizes selection bias, although it is acknowledged that some relevant studies might have been missed due to language restrictions or database limitations.

## **OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT**

“Occupational burnout” is a concept proposed by American clinical psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger in the 1970s during his research on occupational stress. It describes the emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral exhaustion experienced by individuals due to prolonged work-related stress that remains unresolved, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1996). Emotional exhaustion refers to the excessive depletion of an individual's emotional resources, leaving them in a state of extreme emotional fatigue and losing their enthusiasm for work; depersonalization refers to an individual's tendency to reduce their level of service quality or interaction in order to prevent excessive emotional investment in their work, which can lead to increased stress, manifested as a negative, indifferent attitude toward service recipients; low self-efficacy refers to a decline in an individual's sense of competence and job satisfaction, along with a tendency to negatively evaluate the meaning and value of their work (Maslach et al., 2001). Professional burnout reflects teachers' mental health status and job satisfaction. Teacher burnout reduces the quality of teaching work and is closely associated with resignation and early retirement (Ingersoll & May, 2012). Teachers experiencing burnout may struggle to focus on their teaching duties, leading to a decline in course quality. The negative emotions stemming from burnout can cause teachers to lose patience and compassion toward students, while also reducing their sensitivity to students' needs, making it harder to detect changes in students' mental health, which indirectly impacts their development (Klusmann et al., 2016). Beyond psychological impacts, teachers' emotional exhaustion can also significantly predict somatization, obsessive-compulsive, depressive, and anxiety symptoms related to mental health (Yang, 2024). Therefore, effectively addressing teachers' burnout is crucial for improving educational quality. Existing research on occupational burnout among university mental health teachers is relatively scarce. Based on relevant studies on university teachers' occupational burnout, it is found that university teachers have a higher anxiety detection rate than primary and secondary school teachers, and a slightly higher depression detection rate than the National Mental Health Development Report of China (2021–2022) (Wei & Sheng, 2024). The group with the highest levels of stress and burnout is university full-time teachers. The fundamental cause of this phenomenon is the complexity of teachers' work tasks, which involve both educational and administrative responsibilities. This requires teachers to play multiple roles in their daily lives, managing relationships with students, parents, leaders, and the school. They must understand both students' academic performance and their mental health status. As a result, teachers spend significant time balancing these responsibilities, which undoubtedly increases stress and occupational burnout among university teachers (Tao & Peng, 2025). Existing research on occupational burnout among university mental health teachers is relatively limited. The job responsibilities of university psychological teachers are similar to those of teachers, but they require more specialized and modularized work skills. While they have fewer administrative tasks, they have additional responsibilities in teaching, research, psychological counseling, and crisis intervention. Therefore, we can infer that the mental health status and occupational burnout levels of university psychological teachers are worse than those of general teachers. Critical analysis: Although existing studies have documented the prevalence of burnout among university

teachers, most have focused on general faculty rather than mental health educators specifically. The unique occupational demands of mental health teachers—such as continuous exposure to students' traumatic experiences, crisis intervention, and the emotional toll of counseling—remain underexplored. Moreover, the majority of studies employ cross-sectional designs, which preclude causal inferences, and rely on self-report measures that may be subject to social desirability bias. There is also a lack of longitudinal research examining how burnout develops over time in this population. Future studies should adopt mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuanced experiences of mental health teachers and investigate protective factors (e.g., supervision, organizational support) that could mitigate burnout.

## **EMOTIONAL LABOR**

Emotional labor was first proposed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. Emotional labor has three characteristics: “face-to-face, audible contact that generates a certain emotional state, and the imposition of a certain degree of control over emotional activities.” Emotional labor includes three dimensions: surface acting, deep acting, and natural emotional expression. Among these, surface acting refers to teachers altering their outward emotional expressions through suppression or disguise to meet organizational expectations, while their inner feelings remain unchanged; deep acting refers to teachers regulating their emotions through empathy and cognitive restructuring, thereby aligning their internal emotional experiences with their external expressions; natural emotional expression refers to teachers whose external behavior aligns with their genuine feelings, without the need for deliberate masking or alteration, representing the natural expression of authentic emotions (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Different teachers adopt distinct emotional labor strategies depending on the specific context. The educational labor that teachers invest in their work is not merely mental and physical labor; it is also complex emotional labor that requires teachers to experience a range of positive and negative emotions and to regulate their own emotions in order to fulfill their duties (Hargreaves, 1998). Once teachers lose their ability to regulate their emotions, they may exhibit maladaptive behaviors. Therefore, strategies must be employed to control emotional labor, and the labor strategies teachers choose will vary depending on the educational context and the educational environment (Hu et al., 2025). Research findings on the factors influencing teachers' emotional labor can be broadly categorized into three types: personal, organizational, and situational factors. Gender and marital status have no significant impact on university teachers' emotional labor, while educational attainment, years of teaching experience, and professional title do have significant effects (Chen, 2010). In terms of gender, women are more sensitive to emotions and have stronger emotional control than men. Women are more skilled at using surface acting emotional labor strategies than men (Liu & Wang, 2014). Introverted individuals, in order to meet work-related emotional requirements, first adjust their internal emotional experiences to align them with external experiences, thereby employing deep acting emotional labor strategies (Li et al., 2020). In terms of educational background, individuals with higher education are more proficient in using deep acting. Regarding years of work experience, individuals with longer tenure exhibit stronger emotional regulation abilities and greater proficiency in employing emotional labor strategies (Maslach et al., 2001). Organizational factors such as organizational identity, management style, and school culture exert a profound influence on teachers' emotional labor states, intensity, and frequency (Tian & He, 2024). Positive and negative events in teaching contexts have different effects on teachers' emotional labor (Yang & Liu, 2024). Among domestic studies on teachers' emotional labor, the most abundant research findings pertain to preschool teachers and primary/secondary school teachers. Additionally, in terms of subject areas, only teachers in disciplines such as English, music, and physical education have been studied. Research on the emotional labor of university mental health education teachers is virtually nonexistent (Yang & Mao, 2024). In summary, teachers are a profession that requires significant emotional labor, which is influenced by various factors. If not handled properly, it can

lead to negative outcomes. Critical analysis: The existing literature on teacher emotional labor is heavily skewed toward primary and secondary education, with a noticeable gap concerning university mental health teachers. Furthermore, most studies rely on quantitative self-report questionnaires that capture emotional labor as a static trait rather than a dynamic process. There is a need for qualitative or diary-based studies that can capture the moment-to-moment emotional regulation strategies used by mental health teachers during counseling sessions or crisis interventions. Additionally, cultural factors may influence how emotional labor is performed and experienced; comparative studies between Chinese and Western contexts would be valuable. The lack of research on this specific population limits our understanding of how emotional labor contributes to burnout among those who are most emotionally engaged.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS' EMOTIONAL LABOR AND OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT**

Most burnout studies have shown that emotional labor has a unique impact on burnout (Hochschild, 1983). According to resource conservation theory, different manifestations of emotional labor consume different amounts of resources and lead to different outcomes. Emotional labor and emotional exhaustion have a significant bidirectional relationship. Teachers who use labor strategies correctly can effectively prevent the onset of occupational burnout (Tao & Peng, 2025). Surface acting involves suppressing genuine emotions, which continuously depletes psychological resources and can trigger emotional exhaustion; while authentic behavior, which involves the natural expression of emotions, does not additionally deplete psychological resources (Yin et al., 2019). However, research findings on the relationship between teachers' deep acting and occupational burnout are inconsistent. Some studies have found that teachers' deep acting receives positive feedback from students, which can compensate for the psychological resources teachers consume and thereby alleviate occupational burnout. Meta-analyses both domestically and internationally have demonstrated that deep acting and natural emotional expression contribute to enhancing teacher satisfaction and reducing occupational burnout, and that a flexible institutional environment can be utilized to unleash the positive functions of emotional labor (Qu & Shao, 2021). However, other studies have found that teachers' deep acting requires constant emotional regulation, which also consumes psychological resources and leads to burnout, though its negative impact is smaller than that of surface acting (Pisaniello et al., 2012). Additionally, some research has indicated that there is no significant association between teachers' deep acting and burnout (Zhou et al., 2022). In summary, teachers' emotional labor affects the development of occupational burnout. Surface behaviors have a positive impact on occupational burnout, while deep behaviors affect occupational burnout differently depending on the situation. Critical analysis: The inconsistency in findings regarding deep acting and burnout may stem from differences in measurement (e.g., scales used), sample characteristics (e.g., teaching level, culture), or the presence of moderating variables (e.g., organizational support, emotional intelligence). Most studies have been conducted in Western contexts, and their applicability to Chinese university mental health teachers is questionable. Moreover, the majority of studies are cross-sectional, limiting the ability to determine causality. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and examine potential mediators (e.g., emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction) and moderators (e.g., supervisor support, autonomy) to clarify the mechanisms through which emotional labor affects burnout in this specific population.

## **CONCLUSION**

The occupational burnout experienced by university mental health educators stems from the pressures of multiple roles and the high-stakes responsibility of ensuring student safety. When resource support is inadequate, this directly leads to emotional exhaustion and low job satisfaction. The unique nature of their work means that university mental health educators are

constantly exposed to the effects of emotional labor, such as the emotional challenges posed by handling crises or cases involving severe mental health issues, or the conflicting expectations arising from multiple roles, which can lead to anxiety and confusion. Mental health educators abroad operate in different contexts and employ distinct methodologies compared to their domestic counterparts, rendering relevant foreign research of limited applicability. Currently, there is a scarcity of studies in China examining emotional labor among university mental health educators, and even fewer investigations into the relationship between emotional labor and occupational burnout among this population. This paper compiles domestic and international literature using a systematic review approach and critically evaluates the existing evidence. It highlights the urgent need for empirical research focusing specifically on university mental health teachers, employing rigorous methodologies (longitudinal, mixed-methods) and considering cultural and organizational factors. Such research would provide valuable insights for addressing the current state of occupational burnout among university mental health educators and fostering their capacity to effectively utilize emotional labor strategies.

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