

BRIEF REPORT

Managing Job Burnout: The Effects of Emotion-Regulation Ability, Emotional Labor, and Positive and Negative Affect at Work

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The authors examine the relationship between emotion-regulation ability, a key branch of emotional intelligence, and job burnout in 343 Chinese employees from a wide range of occupations and find that emotion-regulation ability is negatively related to job burnout, especially in jobs that require high emotional labor. An objective performance-based test of emotional intelligence shows that positive work affect partially mediates the relationship between emotion-regulation ability and burnout. The study refines understanding of how, to what degree, and under what circumstances emotional intelligence is related to job burnout.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, emotion-regulation ability, emotional labor, job burnout, positive and negative affect

Organizational psychologists have long been concerned to understand more fully how work fatigue and exhaustion may cause employees to experience job burnout (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). Burnout is related to various occupational inefficiencies, such as poor job performance and high absenteeism, and to health problems such as depression and insomnia (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Environmental resources such as social support and less stressful job characteristics are thought to have buffering effects (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Effective interventions for burnout include the development of individual-

level personal resources and capabilities (Zysberg, Orenshtein, Gimmon, & Robinson, 2017).

Burnout is closely related to personal emotions (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003). Indeed, *emotional intelligence* (EI), and specifically the EI dimension known as *emotion-regulation ability* (ERA), may play a role in managing burnout (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010). ERA is defined as the ability of individuals to strategically manage their emotions and the emotions of others (Lopes et al., 2011; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Self-reported EI has been shown empirically to indicate less burnout (Kafetsios, Nezlek, & Vassiou, 2011; Zysberg et al., 2017). However, the extant literature has failed to show whether EI effects apply when the work includes emotional labor, an important job characteristic (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Wong & Law, 2002). Second, researchers have not addressed empirically the mechanism behind EI effects. In particular, researchers have argued that affective states partially mediate how EI affects job attitudes (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008). Third, self-report measures of EI substantially overlap with traditional measures of personality traits (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Mayer et al., 2008) and have common method variance problems (Extremera & Rey, 2016) and self-serving bias (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004).

To clarify the relationship between EI and job burnout, we explore the contingent effect of ERA on job burnout according to varying emotional labor workloads. In addition, we use an objective performance-based test of ERA to examine whether employees can alter their positive and negative affect at work to further manage job burnout. Therefore, our study extends the literature on EI by providing a refined understanding of a key boundary effect

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and the mechanism linking ERA to job burnout. The findings also offer practical guidance to organizations in managing burnout.

ERA and Job Burnout

Job burnout has been defined as a syndrome of exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001) and as fatigue and exhaustion related to work (Kristensen et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). However, the first definition, which includes the component of depersonalization, is not applicable to occupations other than “people” work (Kristensen et al., 2005). Second, exhaustion is an individual state, depersonalization is a coping strategy, reduced accomplishment is an effect (Kristensen et al., 2005), and each of these components is independent from the others (Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000). If depersonalization is a way to cope with stress, it may also intertwine with ERA effects. Consequently, to maintain conceptual consistency and clarity, we define and measure burnout as work-related fatigue and exhaustion.

High EI is generally taken to signify superior ability to deal with emotions (Mayer et al., 2008). Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined EI as encompassing connected abilities across four branches: perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation. A meta-analysis revealed that ERA directly predicts work performance across various occupations, whereas other emotional abilities, such as perception, only predict performance indirectly and remotely (Joseph & Newman, 2010). For such reasons, of the dimensions of EI, ERA has received the most attention from researchers (Brackett et al., 2010; Lopes et al., 2011) and is the focus of the current study.

However, measuring EI factors reliably and validly presents its own challenges because some approaches involve self-report trait inventories (Bar-On, 2006; Petrides, 2009), whereas others use performance-based objective tests. For example, Petrides (2009) proposed a model of well-being, self-control, sociability, and emotionality and measured it via the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, a self-report inventory. Yet these self-report trait inventories substantially overlap with the Big Five personality traits (Joseph & Newman, 2010), and that the results might be inflated by common method variance (Extremera & Rey, 2016), self-serving bias (Dunning et al., 2004), or even faking the responses when respondents have some incentive to do so (Donovan, Dwight, & Hurtz, 2003). Accordingly, we suggest that performance-based objective measurement of ERA has greater potential to advance knowledge in the field, particularly regarding ERA effects in predicting job burnout. The most widely recognized approach to conceptualizing and measuring ERA and other EI abilities by means of objective testing is the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). This is the approach applied in the current study.

ERA may be effective for managing the job burnout (Brackett et al., 2010) that arises when workers lack resources for dealing with emotional and relational demands in their jobs (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001). Employees who have high ERA may have “a larger repertoire of strategies to maintain desirable emotions and to reduce or modify unwanted emotions in both themselves and other people” (Brackett et al., 2010, p. 407). Therefore, ERA may help individuals acquire the emotions needed to accommodate emotional demands. ERA may also help individuals manage their social relationships more effectively (Lopes, Grewal,

Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006; Lopes et al., 2011; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004) and consequently accommodate the relational demands in jobs. Thus ERA may reduce burnout by helping workers deal with emotional and relational demands. Our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: ERA is negatively related to job burnout.

Emotional Labor as a Moderator

The influence of ERA on job burnout may depend on the emotional demands of the job being undertaken; that is, on the degree of *emotional labor*. When employees must manage and present appropriate emotions to their coworkers, supervisors, and customers, they experience a workload demand called emotional labor (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Wong & Law, 2002). Hochschild (1983) investigated the work of flight attendants and found that they are substantially challenged to manage their emotions in dealing with passengers. He further identified other occupations that have similarly high workloads of emotional labor. Although emotional labor may also be defined in terms of regulation processes in those jobs, including surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2000), we follow Wong and Law (2002) and Joseph and Newman (2010) in defining emotional labor as the degree of emotional workload in order to explore the moderating effect of job nature on the relationship between ERA and burnout. This definition is also consistent with the original definition of emotional labor provided by Hochschild (1983).

If ERA reduces job burnout by enhancing the ability to accomplish emotional and relational tasks, emotional labor involved in the job is a plausible moderator of the effect. EI is found to have greater effect on employee attitudes (e.g., turnover intentions) in jobs requiring frequent emotional management (Wong & Law, 2002). A meta-analysis also confirmed that emotional labor has a moderating effect on the relationship between ERA and job performance (Joseph & Newman, 2010). In particular, high EI is found to be associated with frequent use of deep acting, a regulation process leading workers to experience fewer conflicted emotions (Cheung & Tang, 2009), which may counter the exhaustion inherent in emotional labor. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 2: The emotional labor required for the job moderates the effect of ERA on job burnout: The effect is stronger (weaker) in jobs that have high (low) emotional labor.

Positive and Negative Affect at Work as Mediators

Affective states may partially mediate the effect of EI on work attitudes such as job satisfaction (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008). Combined moods and emotions usually generate affective states (Forgas, 1995), either positive or negative (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). *Positive affect* is associated with enthusiasm, alertness, and engagement; *negative affect* is associated with anxiety and sadness (Watson et al., 1988). In the workplace, positive and negative affective states impact various work-related attitudes (Fisher, 2000; Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002; Thoresen et al., 2003; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

ERA indicates individual abilities to manage emotions. Thus, workers who have high ERA may experience more positive and less negative affect at work because they can effectively use their

positive resources to deal with anxiety and depression and can maintain or modify their own and others' emotions in the workplace (Brackett et al., 2010; Lopes et al., 2006). EI has been found to reduce task-induced distress (Matthews et al., 2006) and maintain positive affect despite challenging tasks (Parke, Seo, & Sherf, 2015). Positive affect at work is further negatively related to burnout, whereas negative affect is strongly and positively related to burnout (Thoresen et al., 2003). Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Positive affect at work partially mediates the negative effect of ERA on job burnout: ERA is positively related to positive affect, and positive affect is negatively related to job burnout.

Hypothesis 4: Negative affect at work partially mediates the negative effect of ERA on job burnout: ERA is negatively related to negative affect, and negative affect is positively related to job burnout.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited from several MBA programs in a top-tier university in China. We set three data collection periods to create a temporal separation (3 weeks apart in each case) to reduce common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Participants were tested for ERA at Time 1, emotional labor and work affect at Time 2, and job burnout at Time 3. Surveys were distributed to participants during lecture breaks. Participation was voluntary and without pressure from the researchers. Approval from the human research ethics committee was sought and received prior to survey launch. The final sample included 343 participants (209 men and 134 women), for a total response rate of 42.1%. Participants averaged 33.64 years in age ($SD = 4.79$). All participants had full-time employment, covering a wide range of occupations, including finance, banking, retail, technology, manufacturing, and the public sector.

Measures

ERA. ERA was measured by the branch of emotion regulation in the MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2002), a widely used objective test of EI (Brackett et al., 2010; Lopes et al., 2011). The emotion-regulation branch includes two tasks: emotion management (20 items) and emotional relations (nine items). Participants judge the effectiveness of strategies for managing their own and others' emotions (A = *Very Ineffective* to E = *Very Effective*). MSCEIT is scored based on objective criteria (Mayer et al., 2002) and uses consensus scoring (Matthews et al., 2006). For instance, if a participant chooses A (*Very Ineffective*) for a regulation strategy and 60% of the test norm also choose A, then the participant scores .60 (see Mayer et al., 2002 for details). The split-half coefficient of the ERA was .68 (equation provided by D. Caruso, personal communication, June 9, 2013).

Emotional labor. We assessed emotional labor with five items from an inventory developed to capture the workload of emotional and relational tasks (Wong & Law, 2002) based on the study by Hochschild (1983). A sample item is: "To perform my job

well, I must spend most of my work time interacting with people." The items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Cronbach's α of the scale was .63.

Positive and negative affect. We measured positive and negative affect at work on a 10-item scale from the study by MacKinnon et al. (1999). The five items for positive affect are *inspired, alert, excited, enthusiastic, and determined*; those for negative affect are *afraid, upset, nervous, scared, and distressed*. On a 5-point scale, participants indicated how extensively they experienced each affect in their jobs (1 = *Very Slightly or Not at All* to 5 = *Extremely*). Cronbach's α of the scale was .72 for positive affect and .82 for negative affect.

Job burnout. We measured job burnout on a seven-item scale focusing on exhaustion and fatigue from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005). Answers are on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never/to a Very Low Degree* to 5 = *Always/to a Very High Degree*). A sample question is, "Do you feel that every working hour is tiring?" The scale had a Cronbach's α of .73.

Control variables. We controlled for demographics, occupational factors, and person-organization fit as suggested by the literature (Maslach et al., 2001). Demographic variables include gender (1 = *Man* and 2 = *Woman*) and age (in years). Occupational factors include job rank (1 = *Line Staff*, 2 = *Line Manager*, 3 = *Middle Manager*, and 4 = *Senior Manager and Above*), tenure (years of job experience), and job income on a 12-interval scale from 1 = *3000 CNY* (approximately \$500) to 12 = *More than 60,000 CNY* (approximately \$9,000) per month. Considering that values and personalities greatly affect work outcomes, we also controlled for person-organization fit on a three-item scale (7-point Likert scale) developed by Cable and Judge (1996). A sample item is, "Do you think the values and personality of the organization reflect your values and personality?" Cronbach's α was .81.

Translation. All measures were translated into Chinese following guidelines by Van de Vijver and Leung (1997). The test publisher provided the Chinese version of MSCEIT.

Results

Descriptive and Bivariate Analysis

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations of variables. The sample included 128 line staff, 121 line managers, 74 middle managers, and 20 senior managers, including CEOs. The average job tenure (years of work experience) was 7.81 ($SD = 4.28$). The average income was 6.72 ($SD = 2.34$), indicating an index between salary categories of 6 = *16,001 to 20,000 CNY* (approximately \$2,500–\$3,000) and 7 = *20,001 to 25,000 CNY* (approximately \$3,000–\$3,800) per month.

The mean of ERA was .35, lower than the mean of the whole U.S. normative sample (.45) but close to the mean (.39) of the Asian American normative sample reported by Mayer et al. (2002). ERA was positively related to gender, $r = .13$, $p < .05$, suggesting that women may have higher levels of ERA. ERA was also positively related to emotional labor, $r = .19$, $p < .01$, which may indicate a match over time between job demands and emotional ability. As expected, ERA was positively related to positive affect at work, $r = .12$, $p < .05$, and negatively related to job

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Zero Order Correlations of the Research Variables ($n = 343$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	1.39	0.49	—									
2. Age	33.64	4.79	-.16**	—								
3. Job rank	1.96	0.91	-.12*	.52**	—							
4. Tenure	7.81	4.28	.04	.17**	-.08	—						
5. Income	6.72	2.34	-.14**	.45**	.39**	-.12*	—					
6. P-O fit	3.24	0.79	.01	.10	.08	-.02	.07	—				
7. ERA	0.35	0.06	.13*	.02	.02	.05	-.02	-.03	—			
8. Emotional labor	4.80	0.67	-.05	-.01	-.06	-.02	.12*	-.01	.19**	—		
9. Positive affect at work	3.23	0.56	-.05	.11*	.10	-.03	.10	.21**	.12*	.15**	—	
10. Negative affect at work	1.87	0.62	-.05	.00	-.08	-.02	-.05	-.12*	-.06	.17**	.09	—
11. Job burnout	2.53	0.53	.03	-.16**	-.17**	.00	.01	-.23**	-.12*	.17**	-.16**	.28**

Note. P-O fit = person-organization fit; ERA = emotion-regulation ability.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

burnout, $r = -.12$, $p < .05$. Its correlation with negative work affect was not significant, $r = -.06$, $p > .05$.

Hypotheses Testing

We used structural equation modeling to test the research model, which had a good fit with the data ($\chi^2[20] = 25.49$, $p > .05$; Comparative Fit Index = .99, Tucker–Lewis Index = .95, Goodness of Fit Index = .99, standardized root mean square residual = .03, root mean square error of approximation = .03). As Figure 1 shows, ERA was negatively related to job burnout ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$), suggesting that employees with higher ERA had lower burnout and supporting Hypothesis 1.

The interaction term of ERA and emotional labor was negatively related to job burnout ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .01$). We also conducted simple slopes analysis on the moderating effects by operationalizing high/low emotional labor as 1 *SD* above/below average and depicted the interaction in Figure 2. For the high workload of emotional labor (1 *SD* above mean), ERA had a significant effect in reducing burnout ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$); for the low workload of emotional labor, ERA had an insignificant effect ($\beta = -.02$, $p > .05$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

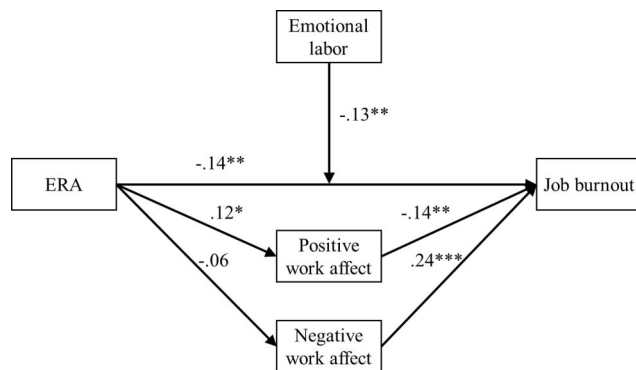


Figure 1. Tested research model with standardized path coefficients. For illustrating the results of main model, control variables and error terms are not shown. ERA = emotion-regulation ability. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Regarding the mediation effect, ERA was positively related to positive work affect ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$). Positive work affect was negatively related to job burnout ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$). Using bootstrap analysis (5000 samples), ERA had a significant indirect effect on job burnout via positive work affect (indirect effect = $-.02$; 95% bootstrap confidence interval from $-.00$ to $-.04$). Hypothesis 3 was thus supported. However, ERA and negative work affect had a nonsignificant relationship ($\beta = -.06$, $p > .05$), failing to support Hypothesis 4.¹

Discussion

We argue and find that employees who have high ERA should be less exhausted by work because they are better able to deal with emotional and relational demands in their jobs. We also find that ERA has a stronger effect on burnout in jobs that require high emotional labor, which indicates that high ERA may influence the regulation processes in those jobs (Cheung & Tang, 2009) as a means of helping employees avert or avoid exhaustion and fatigue. The effect is constrained in jobs that are less emotionally demanding.

The findings also confirm that positive affect accompanies ERA and further mitigates burnout. Consistent with prior literature (Parke et al., 2015), we argue that ERA may help employees maintain positive moods at work, such that they evaluate their

¹ As one reviewer suggested, if affect mediated the relationship between ERA and job burnout, the mediation could also become more salient in jobs with high emotional labor. Accordingly, we tested a moderated mediation model as a post hoc analysis. The result, however, indicated that emotional labor failed to moderate any of the mediation paths. The detail of the result is available from the first author of the paper.

The null result may have occurred because emotional labor may have a less salient moderating effect on the relationship between ERA and work affect. Work affect is mainly caused by work events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Although ERA may have a low direct effect on job burnout in jobs that have low emotional workloads because employees have less need for ERA. That does not mean that ERA has an insignificant effect on work affect because ERA can still be used for dealing with work events such as coworker criticism, challenging tasks, and work stress. Consequently, ERA may still influence work affect.

However, because we did not test the moderated mediation hypotheses, it might be too early to draw conclusions. Nonetheless, we believe that this is an interesting and important area worthy of further investigation.

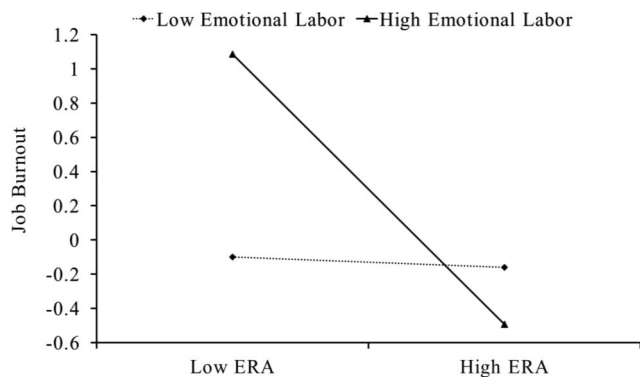


Figure 2. Moderating effect of emotional labor on the relationship between emotion-regulation ability and job burnout. ERA = emotion-regulation ability.

work experiences more positively (Fisher, 2000; Grandey et al., 2002). Negative work affect yields insignificant findings, indicating that workers who have high EI may utilize their ability more for promotion than for prevention purposes (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008). In other words, such workers tend to maintain and generate positive experiences rather than prevent negative feelings.

Our study makes three major contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to literature on burnout by revealing that ERA, a key branch of EI, has both direct and contingent effects for jobs with different emotional labor workloads. Second, we clarify that positive affect at work mediates the relationship between ERA and job burnout. Third, we contribute to methodology in the field by applying a direct and objective measure of EI. Thus we resolve the problems of construct overlaps, common method variance, and self-serving bias appearing in previous findings using self-reports.

Our study has practical implications for managing burnout. The results imply that targeted training and development programs may be used to counter job burnout. We advise managers to design programs that help employees enhance their ERA by using the techniques and strategies of emotion regulation (Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). Based on the finding that the nature of the job is a moderator, we strongly recommend training programs for jobs requiring high emotional labor, such as sales, service and care jobs requiring interactions with customers/clients, or professional managerial positions requiring interactions with subordinates and interdepartmental colleagues. Based on the findings regarding the mediation effect of affective state, training programs should focus on ways in which ERA can be used to heighten the influence of positive affect at work and to reduce burnout, for example, by retrieving positive memories.

This study has a number of limitations. First, although we collected data for the key variables separately in three waves at 3-week intervals, the results obtained cannot definitively prove causal effects. Conclusive proof here would require longitudinal and experimental designs. Second, although we sought to cover employees from different occupations, the nonprobability sampling method means that the findings are less generalizable. Third, the relatively low internal consistency score of the emotional labor measure (.63) indicates the needs for further caution in interpreting the results obtained.

For future research, we encourage more studies to replicate and extend our findings on the relationship between ERA and job burnout. For instance, an experimental or quasi-experimental design stands to offer more robust results on the efficacy of ERA interventions for reducing job burnout. It would be illuminating to collect data on work events to illustrate how the ability to regulate emotions is used to modify and promote work-related feelings in the workplace. Finally, because we have found gender differences in ERA effects, we encourage scholars to investigate more closely how gender may influence ERA effects on job burnout.

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