

Research on the Current Situation of Occupational Stress among Young University Teachers in China

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Abstract: With the development of the international education environment and the continuous reform of higher education in China, the working pace in universities is accelerating, with higher requirements for university work and increasingly apparent pressure on teachers. Young teachers in Chinese universities are prone to occupational stress. In addition to undertaking teaching, research, and other tasks, they feel anxious and at a loss when facing personal issues such as job promotion and taking care of their families. This article selects young teachers from some universities in China as research subjects and uses a questionnaire survey method to understand the current situation and sources of pressure on young teachers in universities, so as to focus on and alleviate their stress in a targeted manner.

Keywords: Young university teachers; Occupational stress; Current situation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of young university teachers

There is no universally accepted definition for young university teachers in China. Currently, teachers who can enter universities generally require at least a doctoral degree. After a long period of study experience, the normal age should be above 28 years old. Considering that in China, research fund projects generally require young and middle-aged project applicants to be under 40 years old, this study sets the upper age limit for young university teachers at 40 years old. Therefore, young university teachers in this study refer to those who specialize in teaching and research work on the front line of universities below 40 years old ^[1].

1.2. University teacher stress

Scholars believe that teacher stress is an unpleasant and negative emotional experience caused by the teaching profession, such as tension, anxiety, anger, frustration, or loss. Through the review of relevant literature, questionnaire data, and interview content, this study believes that the pressure on university teachers refers to the

long-term and sustained effects of stress sources under the constraints of the domestic higher education system, which affect the assessment of personal performance and the completion of work goals^[2]. Due to differences in individual characteristics, coping abilities, and psychological qualities, university teachers experience varying degrees of imbalance when facing the effects of stress sources, forming a series of physiological, psychological, and behavioral reactions^[3].

1.3. Sources of stress

The source of stress, also known as a stressor, refers to any event or stimulus from the internal or external environment that can be perceived by an individual and generate positive or negative stress responses, including situations, stimuli, activities, and events that lead to an individual's stress response. Stressors are divided into biological stressors, psychological stressors, and social stressors. The stressors studied in this article are mainly work-related stressors, including various stimuli, events, and environments that cause work-related stress responses. This mainly includes work pressure, life pressure, and social pressure. The main sources of stress are society, organizations, and individuals, and these factors interact with each other, forming a complex stress system that affects workers' physical and mental health.

Occupational stress, also known as work stress, refers to the pressure in a work context. It is believed that occupational stress refers to the threat that the profession itself poses to practitioners, which is the result of the interaction between the work environment and the characteristics of the worker, changing the psychological and physiological state of the worker. Another scholar believes that occupational stress is the result of the interaction between individual characteristics and work environment requirements, that is, in the work environment, stressors that threaten individual characteristics continue to act on individuals for a long time, and under the influence of individual subjectivity and coping behavior, a series of psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions are produced in a systematic process^[4]. Scholar defines this term as a physical and emotional response in which employees perceive an imbalance between their work needs and their abilities or resources to meet those needs. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers occupational stress to be work-related stress. Occupational stress often stems from unexpected responsibilities and pressures that are inconsistent with an individual's knowledge, skills, or expectations, thereby inhibiting their ability to cope. Based on the review and analysis of existing literature, this article defines occupational stress as a series of physical, mental, and behavioral reactions that occur due to differences in individual characteristics, abilities, and resources under the long-term and sustained influence of occupational stressors.

2. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs includes five needs (**Figure 1**)^[5]: (1) Physiological needs include the need for air, food, water, etc. This is the fundamental factor that sustains people's survival, and only when these fundamental factors are met can they ascend to the next higher level of needs, namely safety needs. (2) Safety need refers to the human need for personal safety, property safety, and moral protection. People need a stable and safe environment to ensure their protection, and fear and anxiety can be eliminated in an orderly environment. (3) Next is social needs. As an individual in society, everyone needs to establish emotional connections with others, such as making friends and pursuing love. People hope to find belonging and love through mutual care and concern. Emotional needs are more detailed and sensitive than physiological needs. (4) Esteem needs include respecting oneself, respecting others, and being respected by others. Respecting oneself includes self-esteem,

confidence, self-love, independence, etc.; respecting others includes respecting their reputation, achievements, or prestige; at the same time, people also hope to receive recognition and respect from others around them, which will make them feel safe and needed, thus giving them more confidence and a more positive attitude towards life. (5) Self-actualization need refers to people pursuing, realizing, and perfecting their own abilities or potentials. People have a series of self-actualization needs due to the stimulation of stressors [6].

College teachers also have their own different levels of needs, but generally go beyond physiological needs such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation, and safety needs such as living security and medical insurance. Their hierarchy of needs is usually at the third, fourth, and highest levels. Under the appointment system for university teachers, competition among colleagues is rampant, and everyone is working hard for their own jobs. In this situation, interpersonal relationships between peers become tense, and superiors have considerable power within a certain range. The phenomenon of administrative interference in academia occurs from time to time, and the equal system between teachers and leaders has undergone subtle changes [7]. At the same time, many schools adopt the method of evaluating teachers by students, which reflects the subject status of students, but has certain drawbacks. Strict demands on students' good looks sometimes fail to gain their recognition. All of the above have led to significant deficiencies in interpersonal relationships, status, and self-esteem among university teachers, resulting in excessive pressure and inability to fully utilize their talents [8].

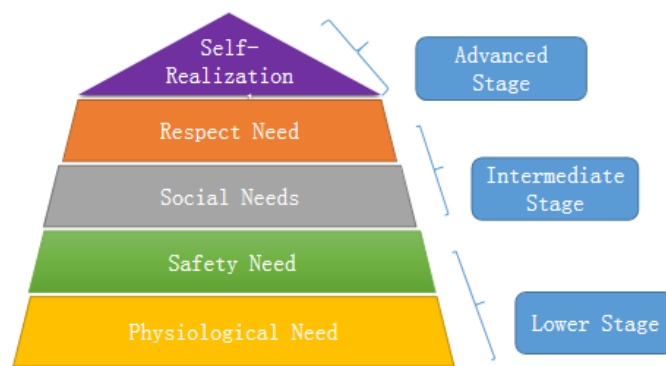


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs model

3. Three levels of stressors for young university teachers

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the sources of stress for young university teachers are classified into three levels: societal level, university level, and individual level, each containing different variables (Figure 2).

3.1. Societal level

People have high social expectations for young university teachers, believing that they have high education and knowledge, and expecting them to cultivate a group of high-quality talents for society [9]. However, in fact, the social recognition and social status given to young university teachers by society are low, and the government's welfare policies for them are also limited, which invisibly puts pressure on them and prevents them from receiving sufficient respect and recognition from society [10].

3.2. University level

Due to the special identity of university teachers, in addition to arranging a full range of teaching courses for

young teachers, universities also assign them heavy research work and even social service tasks, which occupy most of their time^[11]. They are also busy with professional title evaluation and promotion. In addition, schools attach great importance to scientific research and neglect teaching, which conflicts with scientific research and cannot promote each other. The evaluation and reward and punishment system is unreasonable, and the high work requirements lead to reduced leisure and entertainment time. The school cares less about teachers, and the university does not understand the difficulties of teachers^[12]. These multiple factors constitute multiple sources of pressure, making most young university teachers feel overwhelmed, emotionally unstable, and stressed.

3.3. Individual level

Insufficient knowledge and education, uncoordinated colleague relationships, intense job competition, occupational burnout, housing shortages, economic difficulties, and a lack of proportional return and effort, as well as frequent insomnia, headaches, and irritability, are the main variables affecting the physical and mental health of young university teachers^[13].

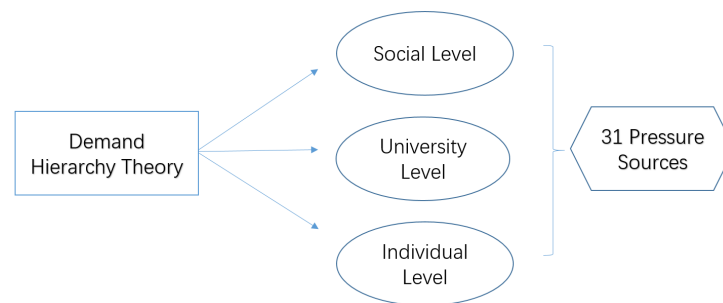


Figure 2. Three levels of stress sources

4. The impact of three different sources of stress on young teachers in Chinese universities

We selected six universities from the eastern, central, and western regions of China, and further selected 30 young teachers (under 40 years old) from each of the six universities, totaling 180 young teachers as participants in the questionnaire survey. We also selected six typical young teachers from these six universities as participants for in-depth telephone or video interviews^[14]. They come from different disciplines, professional titles, and age groups. Their educational backgrounds are mostly master’s or doctoral degrees, making them a highly educated and knowledgeable group. After graduating with a master’s or doctoral degree, they are around 28 years old. Between the ages of 28 and 40, they have undergone 12 years of teaching and research training and gained rich work experience. They are relatively young, and their leaders are more inclined to assign them more work. They may have more say in the stress they feel in their careers^[15]. The impacts of stress at societal, university, and individual levels on young teachers in Chinese universities are shown in **Tables 1 to 3**.

Table 1. Sources of stress at the societal level

| Code | Stress at the societal level (%) | No stress | Low stress | Medium stress | High stress | Great stress |
|------|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| s1 | High social expectations | 18.24 | 34.71 | 16.47 | 17.06 | 13.53 |
| s2 | Low social status | 17.65 | 38.82 | 23.53 | 8.82 | 11.18 |
| s3 | Inapparent welfare policy | 14.71 | 27.06 | 27.06 | 20.59 | 10.59 |

Table 2. Sources of stress at the university level

| Code | Stress at the university level (%) | No stress | Low stress | Medium stress | High stress | Great stress |
|------|---|-----------|------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| c1 | Few opportunities for further study and academic discussion | 12.35 | 8.82 | 38.24 | 22.94 | 17.65 |
| c2 | Emphasis on scientific research and neglecting teaching | 5.29 | 12.94 | 24.12 | 31.18 | 26.47 |
| c3 | Conflict between teaching and scientific research | 7.65 | 12.94 | 30.59 | 37.06 | 11.76 |
| c4 | High scientific research requirements | 2.35 | 6.47 | 9.41 | 32.35 | 49.41 |
| c5 | High requirements for professional title evaluation and employment | 7.65 | 6.47 | 18.82 | 25.88 | 41.18 |
| c6 | Difficulty in project application | 4.71 | 5.88 | 15.29 | 34.12 | 40.00 |
| c7 | Strict promotion system | 17.06 | 19.41 | 32.35 | 19.41 | 11.76 |
| c8 | Lack of professional development | 12.94 | 22.94 | 25.88 | 28.24 | 10.00 |
| c9 | Unreasonable evaluation and reward and punishment system | 11.18 | 13.53 | 19.41 | 31.76 | 24.12 |
| c10 | Large teaching workload | 11.18 | 13.53 | 28.24 | 28.82 | 18.24 |
| c11 | Reduced leisure and entertainment time | 25.29 | 12.35 | 28.82 | 21.18 | 12.35 |
| c12 | The school cares little about teachers and does not understand their difficulties | 10.59 | 40.59 | 25.29 | 12.35 | 11.18 |
| c13 | Lack of trust from leaders | 18.82 | 22.94 | 28.82 | 23.53 | 5.88 |

Table 3. Sources of stress at the individual level

| Code | Stress at the individual level (%) | No stress | Low stress | Medium stress | High stress | Great stress |
|------|---|-----------|------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| p1 | Personal ability is unable to handle high workload work | 7.06 | 21.76 | 25.88 | 28.24 | 17.06 |
| p2 | Not being valued, with intention to resign | 9.41 | 12.94 | 28.82 | 26.47 | 22.35 |
| p3 | Housing shortage and economic difficulties | 13.53 | 11.18 | 27.06 | 40.59 | 7.65 |
| p4 | The return is not proportional to the pay, and low income | 8.82 | 12.94 | 38.24 | 32.35 | 7.65 |
| p5 | Poor work-life balance | 9.41 | 14.12 | 45.29 | 22.35 | 8.82 |
| p6 | Frequent insomnia, headache, and irritability | 9.41 | 12.35 | 38.82 | 28.24 | 11.18 |
| p7 | Lack of professional achievement | 21.76 | 45.88 | 18.82 | 6.47 | 7.06 |
| p8 | Incoordination among colleagues | 25.88 | 37.65 | 15.29 | 12.94 | 8.24 |
| p9 | Intense job competition | 29.41 | 39.41 | 12.94 | 14.71 | 3.53 |
| p10 | Difficulty in managing students | 24.12 | 37.06 | 18.24 | 14.12 | 6.47 |
| p11 | Part-time work | 24.71 | 38.82 | 17.06 | 12.35 | 7.06 |
| p12 | Insufficient knowledge or education | 26.47 | 35.29 | 17.65 | 12.35 | 8.24 |

In summary, we hope that society has a reasonable expectation for the teaching profession, giving teachers certain political respect and improving their economic status. Universities should establish a reasonable evaluation system, training mechanism, and humanized management system, create a good working

environment, and provide a platform for young teachers to communicate and share. Individual teachers should appropriately assess their stress, recognize controllable and uncontrollable stress, and understand short-term and long-term stress. It is necessary to find the best way to effectively control stress, actively seek channels to relieve stress, make full use of the psychological counseling and assistance centers provided by society and universities, resolve psychological confusion, and release excessive stress^[16].

5. Conclusion and prospects

Every industry or position has its challenges and stressors, and the same goes for young university teachers. Young teachers in universities are the core members of higher education institutions and direct practitioners of higher education. They are responsible for cultivating high-level talents at all levels and promoting scientific and technological development and social progress in the country. However, as the most important resource in the higher education system, young teachers in universities have not received corresponding respect and attention. For a long time, teachers' occupational stress has been a focus of research in the field of psychology abroad. Currently, with the continuous deepening of education reform in China, the issue of teachers' occupational pressure has attracted increasing attention. Persistent occupational stress can seriously affect teachers' physical, psychological, and behavioral health, creating a vicious cycle in education^[17]. Teacher stress has also become an issue that universities cannot ignore. It is hoped that society, universities, and relevant managers can take active measures to improve the current situation.

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