



## An Analysis of Occupational Stress and Burnout among Lawyers in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the associations between occupational stress measured through job demand-control (JDC), and burnout among lawyers in Sri Lanka. The job demand-control model and the burnout model are among the most used theoretical frameworks that relate job characteristics to health and well-being of individuals. This study included 290 respondent lawyers practicing in the metropolitan districts in Sri Lanka. Karasek's job content questionnaire was used to measure occupational stress, while the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory were used to measure personal, work-related and client-related burnout. Regression analysis was used to determine the association between occupational stress and burnout among lawyers. Lawyers reported relatively high scores of job control and psychological job demand. They also reported high social support. High levels of personal burnout and client-related burnout were also reported. Personal burnout and work-related burnout were associated with psychological job demand.

**Keywords:** Occupational stress, JDC, burnout, lawyers.

### Introduction

Job demands and job controls in excessive forms lead to occupational stress and this can be taken in the context of harmful physical and emotional responses incurring in the work environment. Studies on occupational stress done previously have utilized Theorell and Karasek's Job Demand-Control-Support model to a great extent. Research has shown that coronary heart diseases, blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, cancer risk factors and psychosomatic symptoms are ill-effects of occupational stress. In terms of burnout, high rates of burnout are associated with the risk of developing cortisol dysregulation and poor mental health.

Stress and burnout can be seen as the side-effects of different kinds of jobs. The varying nature and levels of stress and burnout in this respect can be pinpointed to one or more of the following environmental factors: the quantum of work which one has to do, the extent to which one can decide to employ his or her skills and the amount of decision making authority one has in his or her job (Theorell & Karasek, 1996). These environmental factors are better known as job demands, decision authority and skill discretion (Bruin & Taylor, 2006).

Heavy workloads and time pressure are often considered as factors that leads to high job demand (Theorell & Karasek, 1996; Fernet, Guay, & Senecal C, 2004). Nonetheless, it is also known to include role ambiguity and role conflict.

Skill discretion and decision authority are conceptualized as job controlling factors. Decision authority refers to the prospect of making independent decisions, having a say at the workplace. It concerns the "opportunities for control and decision and therefore... job control per se" (Fernet, Guay, & Senecal C, 2004). Wall et. al have also attested that the skill discretion component addresses the task variety constituent of a job (Wall, Jackson, Mullarkey, & Parker, 1996).

In terms of burnout, Elmwork (2013) describes it as experiencing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced sense by professionals engaged in people-oriented services. It is pertinent to point out that burnout is not stress; however unceasing and continuous stress has a tendency of leading to burnout. Dissatisfaction from work, which used to be fulfilling and appealing are some of the preliminary experiences of burnout. High levels of stress and extreme forms of burnout tend to make individuals' productivity decline to a great extent (Crawford and Querin, 2012).

### Literature Review

Karasek and Theorell in their Job Demand-Control-Support theory have categorized job control into skill discretion and decision authority. Skill discretion has been defined as the level of skill and creativity required on the job and the flexibility permitting the worker in deciding what skills to employ. Decision authority refers to the organizationally mediated possibilities for workers to make decisions about their work. Psychological job demand considers 'how hard workers work', organization constraints on task completion and conflicting demands (Theorell & Karasek, 1996). Job demands refer to physical, social and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are there associated with certain psychological and physiological costs (Demerouti, Nachreiner, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2001).

The opportunity given to make independent decisions at work and to have a say in the workplace has been seen as decision authority (Bruin & Taylor, 2006). The skill discretion component refers to the variety of tasks in a job (Wall, Jackson, Mullarkey, & Parker, 1996).

The job demands and job controls have been said to create separate psychological work experiences for an individual, considering the levels of job demand and job control. Karasek has classified in the following manner; high strain jobs which have high demands and low control, active jobs which have high demands and high control, low strain jobs which have low demands and high control, and finally passive jobs which have low demands and low control (Karasek, 1979).

In terms of the strain hypothesis, high strain jobs lead to greater strain than low strain jobs. The indication underlying this hypothesis is that without decision latitude to manage demands, exceeding pressure from work impedes the well-being of employees. Further, in light of the active learning hypothesis, active jobs are better than passive jobs due to the reason that they motivate individuals and give them the prospect of learning new skills to meet challenges (Turner, Chmiel, & Walls, 2005).

Studies that have examined the job demand-control model have found a reasonable level of support for the strain theory (van der Doef & Maes, 1999; de Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003). In respect of the active learning hypothesis, it is said that there is a beneficial effect of high job control on learning motivation and personal accomplishment but also a detrimental effect of high job demands on these learning orientations (Taris, Kompier, de Lange, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003).

The effect of support from coworkers and supervisors and within these, the impacts of instrumental and socio-emotional support, respectively, is referred to as social support (Theorell & Karasek, 1996). Social support has also been defined more broadly as the process of interaction in relationships which improves coping, esteem, belonging and competence through actual or perceived exchanges of physical or psychosocial resources (Gottlieb, 2000).

Supervisor support refers to the supervisor's concern on the welfare of those under him and paying attention to what is being said and being helpful in getting the job done. On the other hand, coworker support is the competency of the coworkers in doing their jobs and their sociability (Theorell & Karasek, 1996).

Burnout shall be considered in three different categories; personal burnout, work-related burnout and client-related burnout (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005). Personal burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion. Work-related burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as related to the person's work. Finally, client related burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as related to the person's work with clients (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005).

The prevailing view is that burnout is likely to be found in human services such as social work, health care and teaching (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Burnout is likely to be contracted by those who dislike their jobs and even those who love their jobs and enjoy working; the latter due to the fact that countless hours of work everyday give rise to a high possibility of burnout (Carter, 2006).

Carter (2006) has stated that dealing with family law clients leads to the extreme levels of client-related burnout. This is case especially when the clients have mental illnesses and personality disorders. In the consideration of family law cases, it must be noted that lawyers' personal values may conflict with acts done by their clients, resulting in a friction. However, due to ethical principles, they are legally and ethically bound to safeguard their clients' rights.

Past studies have shown that job demand and job control, being stressors that may lead to burnout, in the human services sector, can be found in the work settings as well (Buunk, de Jonge, Ybema, & de Wolff, 1998; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). Emotional exhaustion being a part of personal burnout, has a close resemblance to traditional reactions to stress including fatigue, job-related depression, psychosomatic complaints and anxiety (Buunk, de Jonge, Ybema, & de Wolff, 1998; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Warr, 1987). This overlap has been seen in past studies as well (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Personal burnout has been seen to be related to forms of job stresses such psychological job demand resulting in high workloads and delays in the work place (Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

## Methods

In this study, a questionnaire survey was carried out to obtain information about the occupational stress and burnout of 290 practicing lawyers in Sri Lanka, specific to the main areas; Colombo, Gampaha, Negombo and Kalutara. Some of the respondents were approached personally, while others were contacted via email and the questionnaire was sent to their email addresses. In total over 1000 emails were dispatched to lawyers from the said areas and the response rate was a mere 16% questionnaires being filled online. A team consisting of 8 persons made attempts to communicate with lawyers either in Court or at their offices to get questionnaires filled out. Thereafter in-depth interviews were also carried out with 30 practicing lawyers from the abovementioned areas. The study was carried out over a period of 6 months.

Individual characteristics of lawyers pertinent to the study including their age, gender, number of children, how they live their family life, number of work years, the form of practice whether full-time or part-time, the location of their workplace, their role as a lawyer and their income, were also collected for further analysis. Occupational stress was measured based on Karasek's job content questionnaire, which was categorized into questions pertaining to skill discretion, decision authority, psychological job demand, supervisor support and coworker support. After the test of reliability was carried out, skill discretion was measured by 3 items, while decision authority was also measured by 3 items. The psychological demands scale is the sum of 3 items as well. Supervisor support and coworker support were also measured by 3 items each, leading to a total of 6 items for social support. Items were scored on a Likert scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 4 means "strongly agree". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of skill discretion, decision authority, psychological job demand, supervisor support and coworker support are 0.728, 0.719, 0.706, 0.941 and 0.785 respectively.

The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory was used to measure the levels of burnout among lawyers. The most widely used tool to measure burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory developed by Maslach et al. defines burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment and was originally designed for professionals in the human services sectors of western countries (Maslach & Johnson, MBI: Maslach Burnout Inventory: Manual research edition, 1986). However, concerns have been raised that the Maslach Burnout Inventory mixes the

individual state, coping strategy and effect of burnout syndrome. Thus, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory was chosen for the purpose of this research as it is a more a straightforward measurement of burnout.

In this questionnaire, the questions were categorized under personal burnout, work-related burnout and client-related burnout. Personal burnout was measured using 4 items, and the other categories of burnout; work-related burnout and client-related burnout were also measured using 4 items each. Each item was scored on a Likert scale of 1 to 4, where 1 referred to "never" and 4 referred to "always". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of personal burnout, work-related burnout and client-related burnout are 0.613, 0.653 and 0.804 respectively.

## Analysis

SPSS Version 17 was used to analyze the data. Initially, the data was purified to examine outliers and extreme values in the data distribution. In this regard, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed in order to identify underlying dimensions and verify the conceptualization of the construct of interest. The results of the EFA are provided below in Table 1, which indicates the items which are significantly correlating. As per Cohen (1989), where a correlation value is more than 0.3, it signifies that the factor analysis was acceptable. In the below given table, all the variables except Decision Authority was acceptable; hence Decision Authority was dropped from further analysis.

Table 1: The results of EFA

Variable	Highest Correlation
Job Demand-Control-Support	
Skill Discretion	0.438
Decision Authority	0.107
Psychological Job Demand	0.468
Supervisor Support	0.811
Coworker Support	0.376
Burnout	
Personal Burnout	0.408
Work-related Burnout	0.436
Client-related Burnout	0.695

A descriptive analysis reviewed the mean scores and standard deviations for each variable namely, skill discretion, psychological job demand, supervisor support, coworker support, personal burnout, work-related burnout and client-related burnout. It was revealed that skill discretion had a high mean score resulting in high job control. There was also a high level of psychological job demand among the population. A high level of social support could also be seen from the population. Where burnout is concerned, high physical and emotional exhaustion was evident resulting in high personal burnout among the respondents. However work-related burnout was only evident at a moderate level. This shows that a significant amount of the population believe that their physical and mental exhaustion is primarily caused by work. The respondents also showed high physical and mental exhaustion having dealt with clients, resulting in high client-related burnout. Table 2 depicts the mean, median and standard deviation of the above variables.

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation and Median.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Job Demand-Control-Support			
Skill Discretion	3.37	0.457	3.33
Psychological Job Demand	3.06	0.430	3.00
Supervisor Support	3.14	0.683	3.00
Coworker Support	3.13	0.437	3.00
Burnout			
Personal Burnout	3.03	0.477	3.00
Work-related Burnout	2.70	0.565	2.75
Client-related Burnout	3.01	0.554	3.00

Table 3 shows the regression coefficients on relationship between job demand-control and social support to burnout. Lawyers with high scores of psychological job demand had significantly higher risks of personal burnout. Similarly, those with high scores of psychological job demand, also had a high risk of work-related burnout. Those with high scores of supervisor support had a low risk of work-related burnout. Lawyers with high scores of coworker support had a low risk of client-related burnout.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients on Job Demand-Control and Social Support to Burnout

Dependent Variable	Parameter	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Personal Burnout	Intercept	.539	.269	2.000	.047
	Skill Discretion	.054	.060	.906	.366
	Psychological Job Demand	.560	.064	8.783	.000
	Supervisor Support	-.008	.040	-.193	.847
	Coworker Support	.089	.058	1.471	.273
Work-related Burnout	Intercept	2.946	.360	8.179	.000
	Skill Discretion	-.044	.080	-.554	.580
	Psychological Job Demand	.196	.085	2.303	.022
	Supervisor Support	-.273	.053	-5.134	.000
	Coworker Support	.054	.078	.694	.488
Client-related Burnout	Intercept	3.926	.393	10.002	.000
	Skill Discretion	-.168	.087	-1.938	.054
	Psychological Job Demand	-.025	.093	-.268	.789
	Supervisor Support	.070	.058	1.206	.229
	Coworker Support	-.229	.085	-2.701	.007

## Discussion

The lawyers in this study reported high scores for occupational stress including job control, psychological job demands, supervisor support and coworker support. The respondents also reported high personal burnout and high client-related burnout while showing moderate work-related burnout. Psychological job demands was found to be associated with personal burnout and work-related burnout, while supervisor support was found to be associated with work-related burnout and coworker support was associated with client-related burnout, both the latter were related negatively. These results reflect the stressful and far-reaching lives of practicing lawyers.

Lawyers practicing as counsels were seen to contract occupational stress and burnout at higher levels in comparison to instructing attorneys. This was primarily due to face to face contact, confrontations, making arguments and presentations in court while carrying the burden of the client in their hands. As a result of worrying about the client's interests at all times, lawyers have to be completely focused on their work at all times. Further, with the number of lawyers entering the profession each year by the hundreds, there is growing competition among lawyers, requiring them to be specialized in their area of work. Due to excessive competition, the rewards given for their work done is not par with the efforts they put in.

Furthermore, long working hours at times leading up to 10-14 hours and working over 5 days a week has shown to cause personal burnout stemming from the highly demanding nature of the job. This indicates that lawyers have little time to spend with family and friends, leading to difficulties in differentiating their personal and work lives. This inference can be made in line with the association of psychological job demand to both personal burnout and work-related burnout.

Support from supervisors tend to help lawyers ease through their work and lessen the demanding nature of the job. This has been seen to reduce the levels of work-related burnout as well. Further, support from coworkers has also been seen to reduce client-related burnout. This stems from the friendly and enjoyable atmosphere created by coworkers which helps lawyers deal with the exhaustive issue of dealing with clients burdens.

## Conclusion

This is among the first studies done in Sri Lanka which indicates that occupational stress among lawyers is closely associated with personal and work-related burnout. The study indicates that practicing lawyers face highly demanding and controlling jobs. They are also faced with high risks of personal and client-related burnout. Programs should be conducted by the Bar Association, law firms and other related organizations to deal with the ill effects of occupational stress and burnout contracted by lawyers.

Further studies conducted in this area should consider the developments in the job demand-control-support model and the burnout model. Future research should focus on the ill effects caused by occupational stress and burnout, both physically and mentally and develop measures of countermanding them.

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