

BRIEF REPORT

The Effect of Perceived Teacher Burnout on Credibility

Qin Zhang & David Alan Sapp

This study investigated the effect of perceived teacher burnout on perceived teacher credibility. One hundred eighty-two college students were randomly exposed to a written scenario manipulating the level of perceived teacher burnout (high or low) and responded to a scale measuring perceived teacher credibility in reference to the scenario. Results of one-way multivariate analyses of variance indicated that perceived teacher burnout has a negative impact on perceived teacher competence, caring, and trustworthiness. Low-burnout teachers are perceived as more credible than high-burnout teachers.

Keywords: Caring; Competence; Credibility; Teacher Burnout; Trustworthiness

Burnout is a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic job stress and frustration (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout has three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is characterized by feelings of frustration and depression. Depersonalization involves a dehumanized and impersonal view of others. Reduced personal accomplishment suggests a loss of self-efficacy on the job (Maslach, 1982, 2003). As a front-line profession, teachers are vulnerable to burnout, and teacher burnout has a deleterious effect on the teacher, student, and the institution (Farber, 1991). However, inadequate empirical research has been conducted on teacher burnout in the field of instructional communication.

Teacher credibility is the attitude of a student toward a teacher regarding the teacher's perceived competence, caring, and trustworthiness (McCroskey & Young, 1981;

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Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Teacher credibility is found to be positively related to teacher immediacy (Teven & Hanson, 2004; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998), but negatively to misbehaviors (Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). A direct link between perceived teacher burnout and credibility has not yet been established within the literature. However, given the effect of burnout on the teacher and the negative relationship found between teacher misbehaviors and credibility, it seems reasonable to propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Teacher burnout will have a negative impact on teacher credibility.

Method

Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the manipulation of perceived teacher burnout. Two scenarios were constructed to describe the high- and low-burnout conditions (see Appendix). Based on the Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), each scenario consisted of three sentences, with each representing a dimension of burnout. Fifty-two students (who were not used in the major experiment) were randomly assigned to read one of the scenarios and then complete the burnout scale (Maslach et al., 1996). The *alpha* of the scale was .96. An independent sample *t* test indicated that students reported a significantly higher level of teacher burnout in the high-burnout condition ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.54$) than in the low-burnout condition ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(50) = 16.01$, $p < .001$. Thus, the two burnout conditions were correctly manipulated.

Participants, Procedures, and Instrument

Participants included 182 (60 men and 122 women) students at a small university in the Northeast. The average age of the participants was 19.66 ($SD = 0.78$). Most participants were recruited through a registration event for communication majors. Other participants were enrolled in English and business courses. As part of a larger project (Zhang & Sapp, in press), this study involved randomly exposing participants to a written scenario manipulating the level of perceived teacher burnout. Participants were asked to imagine taking a class from the teacher described in the scenario and respond to the questionnaire assessing their perceived teacher credibility. Teacher credibility was measured with the Source Credibility Measure (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), which consisted of 18 seven-point bipolar descriptions (e.g., intelligent–unintelligent) ranging from 1 (*intelligent*) to 7 (*unintelligent*). The *alphas* for each of these subscales was .95 for competence, .94 for caring, and .94 for trustworthiness.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Teacher Credibility by Teacher Burnout^a

Teacher Credibility	Teacher Burnout					
	High		Low		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competence	4.63	1.23	2.56	1.30	3.55	1.64
Caring	5.33	2.66	2.66	1.44	3.93	1.87
Trustworthiness	4.83	1.05	2.48	1.14	3.60	1.61

^aLower score represents higher credibility.

Results

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine the effect of perceived teacher burnout on perceived teacher credibility. The results revealed a significant effect of perceived teacher burnout on all three dimensions of teacher credibility: competence, $F(1, 164) = 110.35$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .40$; caring, $F(1, 164) = 172.19$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .51$; and trustworthiness, $F(1, 164) = 188.70$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .54$. Low-burnout teachers are perceived as more competent, caring, and trustworthy than high-burnout teachers. Thus, the hypothesis was supported. Means and standard deviations for the variables are reported in Table 1.

Discussion

As hypothesized, perceived teacher burnout was found to have a negative impact on perceived teacher competence, caring, and trustworthiness. Overall, low-burnout teachers are perceived as more credible than high-burnout teachers. This finding suggests that emotional management in the classroom deserves more scholarly attention. Current instructional communication research mostly focuses on teacher communication behaviors such as immediacy, clarity, misbehaviors, affinity seeking, and their effects on students. However, teaching is also an emotional process (Boyer, 1987; Gates, 2000). Instructional communication research needs to extend its boundaries to the study of the emotional aspects of teaching and their effects. Given the negative impact of perceived teacher burnout on teacher credibility, teachers should try to adopt additional positive emotions in class to promote a positive learning environment. Educational institutions may need to provide resources to help teachers manage the effects of burnout.

The results of this study are limited by several factors. First, the use of hypothetical scenarios and fictitious teachers might not reflect the actual teacher burnout and credibility behaviors one would observe in a more naturalistic environment. In addition, the students' perceptions of teacher burnout and credibility could be influenced by some other confounding variables not controlled for in this study. Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution.

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Appendix

Scenarios

High Burnout

You are taking a class from a teacher who seems fatigued, frustrated, and emotionally drained during class lectures and discussions. This teacher treats students as if they were impersonal objects rather than as human beings, and does not care what happens to students. This teacher does not know how to create a relaxed atmosphere with students and has difficulty in dealing with the problems of students.

Low Burnout

You are taking a class from a teacher who seems energetic, passionate, and emotionally engaged during class lectures and discussions. This teacher cares what happens to students and treats students as human beings rather than as impersonal objects. This teacher creates a relaxed atmosphere with students and deals very effectively with the problems of students.

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