The role of individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors in mitigating burnout among elderly Chinese volunteers

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SUMMARY

Objective This study examined the role of individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors in mitigating burnout among elderly Chinese volunteers in Hong Kong.

Methods A total of 295 elderly Chinese volunteers were individually interviewed on their demographic characteristics, voluntary service experience, physical health status, general self-efficacy, social support, satisfaction and perceived benefit from volunteer work, and burnout symptoms. Exploratory factor analysis was first performed to determine the underlying dimensions of burnout experience. Correlation analyses were then conducted to explore associations among major variables. Hierarchical regression analyses were also performed to unearth the relative contribution of various factors in predicting burnout among elderly volunteers.

Results A two-factor structure of burnout, namely lack of personal accomplishment and emotional depletion, was found. Demographics, individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors were significant predictors of lack of personal accomplishment. In particular, personal accomplishment was best predicted by a long duration of voluntary work service and high levels of self-efficacy, work satisfaction, and perceived benefit. For emotional depletion, only demographics and individual factors were significant predictors. A low level of emotional depletion was best predicted by older age, a short duration of voluntary work experience, and good health.

Conclusions Burnout experience was evident among elderly Chinese volunteers. There were different predictors of affective and cognitive components of burnout. Findings have significant implications to attenuate burnout symptoms among elderly volunteers. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY WORDS — elderly volunteer burnout; Chinese elderly volunteers; Chinese elderly burnout

With improved nutrition and advancement in medical care, elderly people are now not only living longer but also remain healthy and capable. They thus constitute a substantial pool of voluntary workers for non-profit social service organizations. The rate of elderly volunteering is expected to continue to rise as a result of changing demographics alongside the active promotion of local and national governments (Chambre, 1993; Chong, 1993). Similar to paid workers, elderly volunteers are also vulnerable to work stress and burnout which may have adverse impacts on their mental health as well as disruption of service to their clients. With global aging, the role of elderly volunteers will become even more important. Thus, various negative aspects of volunteering are in need of attention to facilitate the contribution of elderly volunteers in ways that benefit themselves as well as those receiving their services. This study aimed to unearth various factors associated with burnout among elderly volunteers.

Volunteerism and burnout

Burnout is often defined as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, a sense of lack of personal achievement, and being cynical and callous toward one’s work (Maslach et al., 1996). It is related to reduced physical and mental well-being among employed human service professionals (Burke and Greenglass, 1995;