

## Investigating the Relationship between Job Burnout and Self-Compassion and Tolerance of Ambiguity in Personnel of a Store

Fatemeh Mohammadi 

BA Student in Psychology, School of Humanities, Daneshpajoohan Pishro Higher Education Institution, Isfahan, Iran

**Corresponding Author:** Fatemeh Mohammadi; *BA Student in Psychology, School of Humanities, Daneshpajoohan Pishro Higher Education Institution, Isfahan, Iran*  
**Email:** fatemehmohammadi247@gmail.com

### Quantitative Study

#### Abstract

**Background:** Job burnout is one of the most important factors that affect store personnel's job turnover and service quality. This research was conducted to investigate the relationship between job burnout and tolerance of ambiguity and self-compassion among store personnel.

**Methods:** In this correlational study, 135 employees of a branch of chain stores in Isfahan, Iran, were selected as the participants using simple random sampling method. Data were collected using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003), and Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS; Simons & Gaher, 2005). Data were analyzed using the Pearson correlation coefficient and multivariate regression in SPSS software, at significance level of 0.05.

**Results:** results showed that there was a positive correlation between job burnout and the variables of self-kindness ( $r = 0.34$ ), sense of common humanity (+0.226), and isolation (+0.226), and a negative correlation between job burnout and the variables of self-judgment (-0.336) and mindfulness (-0.318) ( $P < 0.05$ ). According to the results of the regression analysis, the two variables of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity can predict 0.011 job burnout among these people.

**Conclusion:** Based on the results of the present study, it is concluded that there is a negative association between some dimensions of compassion, such as self-judgment and mindfulness, and job burnout. Thus, the occurrence of job burnout can be prevented by increasing the above two variables in this occupational population.

**Keywords:** Tolerance of ambiguity; Self-compassion; Burnout, psychological

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## Introduction

Due to the present-day impressive and continuous developments, organizations work under social, cultural, and economic developments in dynamic, ambiguous, and turbulent environments (Kordnaeij, 2004). In this respect, one of the issues that have received the attention of managers, researchers, and industrial-organizational psychologists is the concept of "job burnout", which is associated with terms like exhaustion, lethargies, lassitude, laxity, and lack of motivation (Seyed Javadin, & Shahbaz Moradi, 2006).

Since 2010, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has recognized burnout syndrome as an occupational disease; moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the syndrome to be an epidemic of the twenty-first century that can affect a large group of employees (Canadas-de la Fuente, San Luis, Lozano, Vargas, Garcia, & Fuente, 2014).

According to Maslach's definition, burnout refers to a prolonged response to stressful factors and interpersonal emotions characterized by the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced social accomplishment (Alharbi, Wilson, Woods, & Usher, 2016).

Maslach also recognizes the loss of an individual's interest in those who work with him/her as job burnout, and characterizes this syndrome by such factors as physical and emotional exhaustion where one has no positive feeling of empathy with or respect for clients (Vassiliadou, 2013).

Previous studies have indicated that job burnout varies under different conditions. Moreover, a significant relationship was noted between occupational burnout of employees and place of work, level of education, type of cooperation, and marriage status (Seyed Javadin & Shahbaz Moradi, 2006). Thus, it is imperative to determine the different underlying job burnout factors that reduce personal performance and efficiency.

In this regard, we encounter the two concepts of "self-compassion" and "tolerance of ambiguity". Self-compassion begins with the hypothesis that all humans are valuable and respectable notwithstanding their achievements, bodily characteristics, and social status (Orsillo, Roemer, & Segal, 2011). Neff (2003) has explained that self-compassion is composed of the three components of self-kindness (self-understanding rather than self-criticism), sense of common humanity (seeing one's experiences as bigger human experiences instead of being alone), and mindfulness (recognition of painful feelings and presence in the moment, not identifying with painful feelings).

Self-compassion does serve as an attribute or a protecting factor that affects the development of emotional flexibility, i.e., having a positive view of oneself when things are not what one deems to be satisfactory. According to this definition, self-compassion is to recognize that suffering, failure, and inadequacy are a part of the ordinary life conditions, and that all human beings, including the person him/herself, is worthy of compassion and kindness. Furthermore, self-compassion is significantly associated with compassion with others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). People with higher self-compassion resolve their interpersonal conflicts based on their own needs and those of others (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). In this connection, speaking of its motivating effects of accomplishment, Breines and Chen (2012) found that self-compassion increases motivation, and thus, improves personal achievement. Self-compassion increases well-being, for example, it helps people to experience a better sense in interpersonal relations (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). Self-compassion helps people

to cope with life challenges and to cease self-blame for things they have no control of. In addition, self-compassion can create social support, encouragement, interpersonal trust, and self-healing abilities in the person (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude (2007) demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with happiness, optimism, motivation, positive emotions, and self-consciousness. This component can also serve as a protective shield against anxiety (especially when the individual exposes him/herself to judgments). Ultimately, individuals with higher self-compassion have better and more effective social communications.

Another studied component is tolerance of ambiguity. McLain (1993) has defined ambiguity as not having sufficient information about the situation. Tolerance of ambiguity refers to the individual's willingness to interpret ambiguous situations which cause discomfort and danger. Brown (1993) suggests that tolerance of ambiguity simplifies the recognition of propositions which contradict the individual's system of beliefs and structure of knowledge. People with lower tolerance of ambiguity usually experience more stress and fail in ambiguous assignments. However, people with higher tolerance of ambiguity serve well in and enjoy ambiguous assignments. In general, lack of tolerance of ambiguity has a major role in anxiety and depression (Abolghasemi & Narimani, 2005). People get confused when faced with unfamiliar, complex, and incomprehensible situations. In such situations, it is the individual's personal characteristic that determines how successful they can cope with a situation that has an uncertain outcome (Radmehr & Karami, 2019).

It is thus important for chain store employees to recognize factors of job burnout so that they can protect their workforce and improve the quality of services offered to customers. Therefore, the determination of levels of job burnout, self-compassion, and tolerance of ambiguity are the goals of this study. These results can be useful for the managers in this domain and the heads of each sector.

## **Methods**

The statistical population of the present correlational study consisted of personnel of a branch of chain stores of the province of Isfahan, Iran, in 2021. They had different education and working records, and were working in different sections of the store, such as security, reception, monitoring, informatics, etc.

The study inclusion criteria were being employed at a store, having at least one year of work experience, and being at least 17 years of age. The study exclusion criteria were disability, special physical diseases such as cancer, having another job, and unwillingness to take part in the study.

Based on these criteria, 200 personnel were qualified for inclusion in the study. According to calculations using the Morgan Table, the sample volume was 135 people. Then, the participants were selected via random sampling method. Explanations on lack of need for citing names and assurance of confidentiality of information were provided to the study participants. Subjects participated in the study with informed consent and in compliance with the principle of confidentiality of the subjects or participants.

The data collection tools used included the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), and Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS; Simons & Gaher).

*Maslach Burnout Inventory:* This inventory was developed in 1981 and measures the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced social accomplishment. This inventory includes 22 items, 9 of which pertain to emotional exhaustion, 8 to reduced individual accomplishment, and 5 to depersonalization. The

items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The validity and reliability of this inventory were confirmed by Saberi, Sadr, Ghadyani, Yazdi, Bahari, and Shahmoradi (2008) in Iran who reported a reliability coefficient of 0.86 using the test-retest method (Biganeh, Abolghasemi, Alimohammadi, Ebrahimi, Torabi, and Ashtarinezhad, 2018).

**Self-Compassion Scale:** The SCS is a 26-item self-report scale that was constructed by Neff in 2003. This scale includes the 6 subscales of self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification. The items of this inventory are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The total score of self-compassion is obtained by calculating the average of the 6 subscales. The internal consistency of this scale in past researches was 0.92, and its test-retest reliability was 0.93 (Neff, 2003). The reliability of the overall scale was 0.86 using Cronbach's alpha (Khosravi, Sadeghi, & Yabandeh, 2013).

**Distress Tolerance Scale:** The DTS is a self-assessment measure of emotional distress tolerance which was developed by Simons and Gaher. This scale has 15 items and 4 subscales under the headings of tolerance, absorption, appraisal, and regulation. In this scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.82, and the intra-class correlation was 0.61 after 6 months (Simons & Gaher, 2005). Azizi, Mirzaei, and Shams (2010) reported the Cronbach's alpha of this coefficient to be 0.67, and its test-retest validity to be 0.79.

The multivariate regression model was used to determine the predictors of job burnout. The Pearson test was also used to examine the relationship between the variables. All statistical tests were performed in SPSS software (version 26, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and at a significance level of 0.05.

## Results

This research consisted of 135 people (59 men and 76 women). Among the participants, 57% were single and 43% were married. The mean  $\pm$  standard deviation of the subjects' age was  $29.47 \pm 7.26$  years, and their average work record was 6.18 years.

The descriptive information is listed more fully in table 1. The three main research components of job burnout, self-compassion, and ambiguity tolerance have mean  $\pm$  standard deviations of  $15.88 \pm 21.34$ ,  $61.83 \pm 11.58$ ,  $45.76 \pm 10.15$ , respectively. The maximum and minimum of the burnout prediction component were 128 and 15, respectively.

**Table 1.** Descriptive data of research variables (n=135)

	Variables	Mean $\pm$ SD
Self-compassion	Self-kindness	$17.60 \pm 4.94$
	Self-judgment	$11.81 \pm 3.67$
	Mindfulness	$14.25 \pm 4.11$
	Overidentification	$12.94 \pm 3.41$
	Common humanity	$13.49 \pm 3.00$
	Isolation	$13.49 \pm 3.00$
Tolerance of ambiguity	Self-compassion	$83.61 \pm 11.57$
	Tolerance	$9.10 \pm 3.26$
	Absorption	$9.16 \pm 3.87$
	Appraisal	$18.19 \pm 5.17$
	Regulation	$9.29 \pm 3.47$
Job burnout	Tolerance of ambiguity	$45.75 \pm 10.15$
	Exhaustion	$38.17 \pm 12.57$
	Depersonalization	$23.16 \pm 5.93$
	Lack of individual accomplishment	$26.80 \pm 8.49$
Job burnout		$88.14 \pm 21.34$

SD: Standard deviation

Table 2 presents data on the correlation between the components of the predictive variables and the criterion variable. As can be seen, there is a significant relationship between the total self-compassion score and all its subscales and job burnout; however, there is a negative relationship between total self-compassion score and the variables of self-judgment and mindfulness. Moreover there is a positive relationship between the total score of self-compassion and the subscales of common humanity and isolation. Therefore, the research hypothesis of the presence of a correlation between the variables is confirmed.

Using regression method, the two components of self-compassion, tolerance of ambiguity, and the relevant scales were investigated to predict job burnout. To this end, the variables of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity as predictive variables and the variable of job burnout as the criterion variable were entered into the regression model. The coefficient of determination was found to be 0.219, indicating that predictive variables explained 21.9% of the variance in job burnout. Consistent with this model, the multiple correlation was 0.468, suggesting the predictive variables were correlated with job burnout at 46.8%.

According to B values presented in table 3, the values of self-kindness and self-judgment were 1.103 and 1.206, respectively. Thus, with other variables being constant, for each unit of change in self-kindness, job burnout increases by 1.103 units, and with each unit of change in self-judgment, job burnout is decreased by -1.206. According to the values obtained, the research hypothesis of the possibility of predicting job burnout with the subscales of self-kindness and self-judgment was confirmed.

**Table 2.** Correlation results of the predictive variables with the criterion variable (Part I)

Variables	Self-kindness	Self-judgment	Mindfulness	Overidentification	Common humanity
Self-kindness	1				
Self-judgment	-0.201*	1			
Mindfulness	-0.236**	0.619**	1		
Overidentification	0.353**	-0.078	0.002	1	
Common humanity	0.459**	-0.332**	-0.254**	0.470**	1
Isolation	0.459**	-0.332**	-0.254**	0.470**	1.00**
Tolerance	0.050	0.050	-0.013	-0.011	0.109
Absorption	0.011	0.049	0.022	0.006	-0.085
Appraisal	0.009	0.083	-0.008	0.060	-0.009
Regulation	0.040	0.020	0.091	0.127	0.147
Job burnout	0.345**	-0.336**	-0.318**	0.201*	0.226**

**Table 2.** Correlation results of the predictive variables with the criterion variable (Part II)

Variables	Isolation	Tolerance	Absorption	Appraisal	Regulation	Job burnout
Self-kindness						
Self-judgment						
Mindfulness						
Overidentification						
Common humanity						
Isolation	1					
Tolerance	0.109	1				
Absorption	-0.085	0.625**	1			
Appraisal	-0.009	0.486**	0.610**	1		
Regulation	0.147	0.122	0.085	-0.152	1	
Job burnout	0.226**	0.072	-0.023	0.018	-0.012	1

\*\*indicates significance at the 0.01 level, \*indicates significance at the 0.05 level

**Table 3.** Results of prediction between the predictor variables and the criterion variable

Variables	B	Standard error	Standard coefficient	T-value	P-value.
Constant value	87.550	14.258		6.141	0.000
Self-kindness	1.103	0.396	0.256	2.788	0.006
Self-judgment	-1.206	0.604	-0.208	-1.997	0.048
Mindfulness	-0.768	0.536	-0.148	-1.434	0.154
Overidentification	0.749	0.576	0.120	1.299	0.196
Isolation	-0.498	0.736	-0.070	-0.676	0.500
Absorption	-0.854	1.079	-0.115	-0.791	0.430
Appraisal	0.28	0.539	0.007	0.052	0.959
Tolerance of ambiguity	0.234	0.392	0.111	0.597	0.552
Constant value	87.550	14.258		6.141	0.000

## Discussion

The aim of the present research was to investigate the relationship between job burnout and variables of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity among store employees. The study findings revealed that the two variables of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity explained 1.1% of the changes in job burnout. These findings are consistent with those of Khoramniya, Foroughi, Goodarzi, Bahari Babadi, and Taheri, (2020), Chio, Mak, & Yu (2021) who reported that self-compassion is a defensive shield against burnout.

As mentioned, the results of the current research have shown that job burnout has a positive relationship with the subscales of self-compassion, such as self-compassion, excessive assimilation, human contributions, and isolation, and an inverse relationship with the self-Judgment and mindfulness subscales. In confirmation of this, it can be stated that the structure of self-compassion contrasts that of self-judgment (self-awareness instead of judgment or criticism and a kind of compassion and support towards one's shortcomings and inadequacies) (Neff, 2003). The use of the structure of compassion for oneself and having a nonchalance attitude towards one's incompetencies and inadequacies and not judging them may be useful at the beginning of one's career path and cause career progress; however, in the long term, it will gradually reduce the efficiency and performance of people in workplaces. This structure is in conflict with the self-judgment structure, and therefore, has an inverse correlation with job burnout; this finding is consistent with the findings of Saeedi, Ghorbani, Sarafraz, and Sharifian (2012).

People who have a judgmental view of self-inefficiency or failure attribute all results and events to themselves and blame themselves when faced with suffering. The more a person judges their job challenges in the long term and recognizes her/his shortcomings while working, the more he/she will try to solve them, which ultimately leads to the improvement and increasing of his/her work efficiency. This will make them feel worthy, sufficient, and useful, and they will experience less job burnout. The other desired component is the awareness that a balanced and clear awareness of the experiences of the present is against the excessive assimilation that causes the painful aspects of an experience to be neither ignored nor repeatedly occupy the mind (Neff, 2003). In support of the results, it can be said that a person, who is aware of his/her thoughts and feelings and does not obsessively adhere to them and does not ruminate on them in the mind, can find a suitable solution and deal with these feelings. However, a person who has extreme identification is drowned in these thoughts and acts only based on excitements. The mind of these people is constantly full of unpleasant thoughts and feelings. They feel helpless and

weak with the gradual increase of various challenges and problems in the work and organizational environment, especially store jobs that constantly deal with various customers and various activities. This explanation is the concept that is consistent with job burnout syndrome and with the findings of Afshani and Abooei (2017).

The structure of human contributions against isolation is a concept that reminds us that facing the dilemma and difficulties of life is part of the common experience of all humans and is not unique to one person (Yaghoubi & Akrami, 2017).

Tolerance of ambiguity is conceptualized as uncertainty towards parts of life, the ability to continue life with incomplete knowledge of the environment, and tendency to starting an independent activity without the individual being certain of his/her success (Ahmadpour Dariani, & Ebrahimi, 2008). Furnham and Ribchester (1995) maintain that people with lower tolerance of ambiguity are more likely to experience more stress and react prematurely, and thus, avoid ambiguous stimuli, whereas people with high tolerance of ambiguity may be absorbed into new and complicated situations. The former group, i.e., people with lower tolerance may respond to ambiguous stimuli with anxiety, avoidance, and denial (McLain, 2009).

When an individual or a group of people face a number of unfamiliar, complicated and ambiguous methods, they experience ambiguity; under such circumstances, it is the individual's personality traits that determine to what extent s/he can successfully cope with a situation which has an ambiguous outcome (Saeedi Mobarakeh & Ahmadpour, 2013).

The findings of the present research on the insignificance of the prediction of the criterion variable are inconsistent with the researches by Malekpour Lapari and Bakhtiarirenani (2021), Khedmati (2019), and Hashemi (2018). To explain this, it should be stated that the two variables of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity could not alone predict job burnout in a sample of store employees; for the prediction of job burnout, we require various variables and possibly personality tests because different classes with different cultures, educations, and livelihood issues impact this field.

People working in this domain have different ages, perspectives, cultural levels, and personality traits. As previously mentioned, personality traits are highly effective on explaining tolerance of ambiguity. In addition, people's view the store job as a temporary occupation undertaken in the hope of finding a better job. This attitude can be the basis for the investigation and analysis of various factors in this field to reach concrete results.

The limitations of this research include smaller literature review about job burnout based on two factors of self-compassion and tolerance of ambiguity, use of self-report scales for gathering data, and the statistical population of the study being limited to a specific store. Thus, care should be taken when generalizing the results.

In the end, the researcher proposes that this study be repeated by means of other effective variables, and calls for the use of observation and interview for gathering data.

## **Conclusion**

The results showed that using the self-compassion component could contribute to explaining job burnout in the retail industry. Therefore, it is recommended to enhance self-compassion to increase productivity and job quality in these types of occupations. Additionally, the sub-scales of self-compassion and ambiguity tolerance were also mentioned in relation to interactions and communication. Considering these factors, due to the difficulty and increased pressure in these types of jobs, it is necessary for all managers and employees to receive training in self-compassion and ambiguity tolerance. This will help them effectively deal with their work challenges.

adapt to them, and ultimately provide excellent service to their customers.

### **Conflict of Interests**

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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