**Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology**
Volume 40 Number 5
September 2009 894-900

10.1177/0022022109339392
http://jccp.sagepub.com

# Burnout, Perceived Stress, and Resources Among Educated, Working Jews and Moslem Arabs in Israel

## A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Kulik Liat
*Bar Ilan University*

This study deals with differences in levels of burnout and in the variables that explain it (perceived stress, personal resources, and social resources) among 109 Jews and 122 Moslem Arabs belonging to dual-earner families in Israel. Levels of burnout and variables that explain it are similar for the Jews and Moslem Arabs. The variables that most significantly explain levels of burnout in the two sociocultural contexts are hardiness, perceived stress, and gender.

***Keywords:*** *sociocultural context; culture; burnout; flextime arrangements; hardiness.*

This study aimed to examine differences in levels of burnout and the variables that explain it among Moslem Arab and Jewish Israelis in dual-earner families. Burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in an emotionally demanding situation. Manifestations of burnout include fatigue, lack of motivation, and negative attitudes regarding the self and the environment (Pines, 1993). It has been argued that burnout is caused by a loss of energy due to minor daily stressors but not by critical life events. These stressors typify dual-earner families with school-age children, who encounter numerous situations of role conflict due to the simultaneous demands of home and work (Barnett, 1993). In addition to examining the experience of stress that causes burnout in dual earner families, the present study also examined factors that can prevent, buffer, and alleviate the development of burnout generated by perceived stress (for a review, see Avison & Cairney, 2003). Specifically, the study focused on three types of resources that facilitate coping with perceived stress and that reduce levels of burnout: perceived spousal support, perceived support in the workplace (both representing social resources), and hardiness (representing personal resources). Perceived spousal support involves subjective evaluations of instrumental and emotional assistance provided by the partner. Perceived support in the workplace was defined in this study in terms of flexible management patterns, or flextime (Galin & Carmi, 1990). Because flexible schedules allow employees to meet their family responsibilities and still work enough hours to fulfill their workplace obligations, flextime can be viewed as a kind of organizational support. As such, it can reduce role conflict deriving from the simultaneous demands of home and the workplace and can thus mitigate perceived stress.

*Hardiness*, the personal resource examined in this study, is defined as a constellation of personality characteristics that exist along three separate and interdependent dimensions: commitment (versus alienation), challenge (versus threat), and control (internal versus external) (Kobasa, 1982). Hardiness is considered a coping resource in that it facilitates optimistic perceptions and promotes effective coping with stressful situations. It was found that resources such as hardiness, perceived spousal support, and flextime can have a direct impact on reducing levels of burnout as well as an indirect effect through reduction of perceived stress, which in turn reduces negative responses such as burnout (Wheaton, 1983).

The basic assumption of this study was that in addition to the stressors commonly encountered by individuals in dual-earner families as a result of the conflict between home and work demands, some stressors derive from a sociocultural context. For example, differences in levels of burnout and its correlates among the two groups of participants in this study could be attributed to the unique situation of the Arab population as a minority living in the midst of a Jewish majority. According to Pearlin (1993), minorities may develop different perceptions of the same reality and are susceptible to stress because of confusion of their norms and values with those of the majority culture. Notably, Jewish Israeli culture is achievement oriented, is individualistic, and emphasizes autonomy (Izraeli, 1994), whereas Moslem Arab culture emphasizes determinism, collectivism, and social integration (Richardson, 2004).

### Research Hypotheses and Goals

1. We hypothesized that there will be differences between Jews and Moslem Arabs in Israel with regard to perceived stress, resources, and levels of burnout.
2. We hypothesized that resources and perceived stress will correlate significantly with levels of burnout. Moreover, we aimed to examine whether the correlation differs for Jews and Moslem Arabs in Israel.
3. We hypothesized that the relationship between resources and levels of burnout will be mediated by perceived stress. Moreover, we aimed to examine whether the relationship differs for Moslem Arabs and Jews in Israel.

In addition to these specific research hypotheses, we examined the overall contribution of resources and perceived stress in explaining levels of burnout and whether that contribution differs for Jews and Moslem Arabs.

## Method

### Sample and Data Collection

The sample comprised 231 married people in dual-earner families with at least one child living at home (122 Moslem Arabs and 109 Jews). Of those participants, 113 were men (62 Moslem Arabs and 51 Jews), and 118 were women (60 Moslem Arabs and 58 Jews). The participants in the study were employed in government organizations and at the Ministry of Education. All of the Arab participants were employed in homogeneous Arab work environments, and the Jewish participants were employed in homogeneous

Jewish work environments. The mean age of the Moslem Arab participants was 37.31 years ($SD$ = 6.98), compared with 40.47 years ($SD$ = 8.11) for the Jewish participants. Regarding education level, 19.9% of the Moslem Arab participants had partial secondary education, 15.5% were high school graduates, and 64.6% had postsecondary education (academic or other). For the Jews, those figures were 11.9%, 12.9%, and 75.2%, respectively. Among the sample of Arab participants, the questionnaires were distributed at workplaces to educated, Hebrew-speaking residents of five villages in the central and northern regions of Israel. Among the sample of Jewish participants, the questionnaires were administered at workplaces throughout the country.

## Instruments

*Sociodemographic questionnaire*. The questionnaire was used to obtain background data on characteristics such as age, sex, level of education, hours of work per week, and sociocultural context (Arabs versus Jews).

*Burnout*. The original questionnaire developed by Pines (1987) included 21 items. Participants were asked to indicate, for example, how often they feel fatigued, disappointed, trapped, and so forth on a 7-point scale. The higher the score, the greater the participant's levels of burnout. Cronbach's alpha reliability values were .83 for the Jewish sample and .86 for the Arab sample.

*Perceived stress*. The variable was examined on the basis of the Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen, Kamark, and Mermelstein (1983). The questionnaire included 14 items measuring participants' emotional state during the past month, on a 5-point scale: The higher the score, the higher the level of perceived stress. Cronbach's alpha reliability values were .84 for the Jewish sample and .87 for the Arab sample.

*Perceived spousal support*. One question was used to evaluate the participants' general levels of perceived spousal support. Responses were based on a 5-point scale: The higher the score, the greater the extent of perceived spousal support received.

*Hardiness*. Hardiness was examined through the Third Generation Hardiness Scale developed by Kahn (1986). This 34-item instrument was based on the theoretical approach of Kobasa (1982), and it assessed the participants' feelings of control, commitment, and challenge. Responses were based on a 5-point scale: The higher the score, the greater the extent of hardiness. Cronbach's alpha reliability values were .82 for the Jewish sample and .89 for the Arab sample.

*Flextime*. This instrument was developed for the current study to evaluate flexibility in workplaces, based on criteria such as opportunities to set flexible arrival and departure times and opportunities to take some work home. Responses were based on a 5-point scale: The higher the score, the more flexible the participants' work schedule. Cronbach's alpha reliability values were .88 for the Jewish sample and .87 for the Arab sample.

**Table 1**
**Differences in the Research Variables, by Sociocultural Context (Arabs Versus Jews) and Gender**

| | Sociocultural Context | | | | | | Gender | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Arabs | | Jews | | | | Men | | Women | | | |
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *F* | $Eta^2$ | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *F* | $Eta^2$ |
| Burnout | 2.98 | 0.87 | 2.80 | 0.64 | 3.83 | .02 | 2.74 | 0.81 | 3.06 | 0.73 | 11.37** | .04 |
| Spousal support | 3.75 | 1.04 | 3.88 | 0.90 | 3.93 | .00 | 3.93 | 0.99 | 3.70 | 0.95 | 3.22 | .01 |
| Flextime | 2.27 | 0.82 | 2.98 | 0.68 | 5.61* | .16 | 2.61 | 0.85 | 2.54 | 0.83 | 0.08 | .00 |
| Hardiness | 2.75 | 0.27 | 3.07 | 0.21 | 8.87** | .25 | 2.87 | 0.30 | 2.93 | 0.28 | 3.67 | .01 |
| Perceived stress | 2.63 | 0.47 | 2.53 | 0.43 | 2.51 | .01 | 2.51 | 0.45 | 2.76 | 0.45 | 6.48* | .02 |

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

# Results

## Differences Between Jewish and Moslem Arab Participants in the Research Variables

Two-way ANOVA, which included the between-group factors (sociocultural context and gender), was conducted for burnout (see Table 1). Although no significant difference was found between the Moslem Arabs and the Jews in levels of burnout, there was a difference between men and women from both sociocultural contexts: The women reported higher levels of burnout than did the men. No significant interaction was found for Sociocultural Context × Gender.

In addition, two-way MANOVA, which included the between-group factors (sociocultural context and gender), was conducted for the independent variables (perceived stress and resources). The analysis revealed significant differences for sociocultural context, $F(5, 230) = 27.06$, $p < .001$, $eta^2 = .32$, as well as for gender, $F(1, 230) = 6.92$, $p < .001$, $eta^2 = .12$. Two-way ANOVAs, which included the between-group factors (sociocultural context and gender), were conducted separately for each variable (see Table 1). The analyses revealed significant differences by sociocultural context for only two of the resources: hardiness and flextime. The Jewish participants reported higher levels of hardiness than did the Moslem Arab participants. In addition, the Jewish participants had more flexible work arrangements than did their Moslem Arab counterparts. Two-way ANOVAs also revealed gender differences in perceived stress: The women reported higher levels of stress than did the men. No significant interaction between sociocultural context and gender was found for any of the research variables.

## Correlations Between Levels of Burnout and the Explanatory Variables

Pearson's correlations were calculated between levels of burnout and the explanatory variables of the study. Calculations were carried out separately for the Moslem Arab and Jewish participants. On the whole, correlations were found between levels of burnout and

several explanatory variables among the Moslem Arab and the Jewish participants. However, Fisher Z tests revealed no significant differences in the strength of the correlations between the research variables for Moslem Arabs and Jews. Levels of burnout correlated negatively and significantly with levels of education, perceived spousal support, and hardiness: The higher the participants' levels of education, perceived spousal support, and hardiness, the lower their levels of burnout (education: $r = –.23$, $p < .01$ for Arabs and $r = –.15$, $p < .05$ for Jews; spousal support: $r = –.17$, $p < .05$ for Arabs and $r = –.15$, $p < .05$ for Jews; hardiness: $r = –.39$, $p < .001$ for Arabs and $r = –.41$, $p < .001$ for Jews). In addition, levels of perceived stress correlated positively with levels of burnout ($r = .59$, $p < .001$for Arabs; $r = .50$, $p < .001$ for Jews).

## The Overall Contribution of the Research Variables to Explaining Levels of Burnout

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the overall contribution of the variables to explaining levels of burnout. The regression analysis shows that all of the research variables succeeded in explaining 39% of the variance in levels of burnout. Of the sociodemographic variables that were entered in the first step, only gender contributed significantly to explaining levels of burnout: Beta = .21, $p < .01$. The directions of the Beta coefficients indicate that women reported higher levels of burnout than did men. Of the resources, which were entered in the second step, only hardiness contributed significantly to explaining levels of burnout (Beta = –.53, $p < .001$). In the third step, perceived stress entered the equation (Beta = .39, $p < .01$). Examination of the size of the Beta coefficient in the third step as compared with the second step indicates that when perceived stress entered the equation in the third step, the Beta coefficient for hardiness was lower than in the second step. This decline in the size of Beta coefficient indicates that perceived stress mediated between hardiness and levels of burnout: Higher levels of hardiness reduced levels of perceived stress, which in turn led to lower levels of burnout. A Sobel test confirmed that this mediating effect was significant ($Z = 3.94$, $p < .001$). The direct influence of hardiness on levels of burnout was Beta = –.34, $p < .01$, and the indirect influence was Beta = –.20, $p < .01$. It should be mentioned that none of the interactions between the research variables and sociocultural context contributed significantly to explaining the variance in levels of burnout. The absence of an interaction indicates that there was no difference in the set of variables that explained levels of burnout among Jews and Moslem Arabs.

## Discussion

Before discussing the research findings and the main conclusions that can be drawn from them, it should be noted that the results relate to individuals belonging to dual-earner families and not to the general population of Israel. In addition, the Arab participants were all fluent Hebrew speakers with higher than average educational achievements. As for the Jewish participants, the majority were educated, white-collar clerks in government organizations. For those reasons, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study. At best, the research findings apply to well-educated Jews and Moslem Arabs

belonging to dual-earner families in Israel. An additional limitation of the study relates to the status of the Arab population as a minority in Israeli society. Hence, the Jewish and Arab participants may have had different interpretations of the items in the study questionnaires, and this may have biased the results. Nonetheless, notwithstanding inherent differences between the two sociocultural contexts, the Jewish and Moslem Arab participants in this study showed general similarities with regard to levels of burnout as well as with regard to some of the explanatory variables. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding relates to the homogeneous composition of the research sample. Notably, the sample focused on individuals who belong to dual-earner families and who still have children living at home. Under these circumstances, both the Moslem Arab and Jewish participants encountered the same daily stressors related to the conflicting demands of home and work, and they developed similar coping strategies irrespective of cultural differences. Besides similarities in levels of burnout among participants in the two sociocultural contexts, differences in two areas of coping resources are noteworthy: hardiness and flextime arrangements. Regarding hardiness, the findings indicate that Jewish society, which emphasizes Western values such as developing a sense of mastery over one's life, achievement, and challenge, is more conducive to developing a hardy personality than is Moslem Arab society. Regarding flextime patterns, organizations in Jewish society have flexible work arrangements, whereas organizations in Arab society tend to maintain more traditional patterns of management. Thus, the Moslem Arab participants in this study, who were all employed in homogeneous Arab workplaces, benefited less from flextime patterns than did their Jewish counterparts. Similarities between the two sociocultural contexts were found not only in most of the research variables but also in the correlation patterns among the explanatory variables (perceived stress and resources) and the outcome variable: that is, level of burnout. Thus, the findings suggest that the process that generates burnout in dual-earner families is similar for Jews and Moslem Arabs. Among participants from both social contexts, hardiness contributed more to explaining burnout than did any other personal or social resource. Besides the direct contribution of hardiness to reducing levels of burnout, its importance is also reflected in the finding that the effect of hardiness on burnout was mediated by perceived stress. This result suggests that people with high levels of hardiness also experience lower levels of stress and, in turn, are less vulnerable to burnout. However, in light of the correlative nature of the study, it can also be argued that burnout also affects perceived stress and resources. Therefore, to reach more clear-cut conclusions regarding the impact of hardiness and stress on burnout, it would be worthwhile to use a longitudinal design in future research. Finally, the impact of gender was greater than that of the sociocultural context: The Jewish and Moslem Arab women reported more burnout and perceived stress than did the men. Evidently, in both social contexts, women in dual-earner families experience a heavier burden than men because of the multiple demands of the family and workplace.

## References

Avison, W. R., & Cairney, J. (2003). Social structure, stress and personal control. In S. H. Zarit, L. I. Pearlin, & W. K. Schaie (Eds.), *Personal control in social and life course contexts* (pp. 127-164). New York: Springer.

Barnett, R. C. (1993). Multiple roles, gender, and psychological distress. In L. Goldberger & S. Breznitz (Eds.), *Handbook of stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects* (2nd ed., pp. 427-448). New York: The Free Press.

Cohen, S., Kamark, J., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *24*, 385-396.

Galin, A., & Carmi, O. (1990). *Nihul gamish, nihul 2000* [Management 2000, flexible management]. Tel Aviv: The Management Library in collaboration with the Israel Industrial Relations Research Association (Hebrew).

Izraeli, D. N. (1994). Money matters: Spousal incomes and family work relations among physician couples in Israel. *Sociological Quarterly*, *35*, 64-74.

Kahn, S. (1986). *Fact sheet for third generation hardiness test*. Arlington Heights, IL: The Hardiness Institute.

Kobasa, S. C. (1982). The hardy personality: Toward a social psychology of stress and health. In J. Suls & G. Sanders (Eds.), *Social psychology of health and illness* (pp. 3-33). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Pearlin, L. I. (1993). Environmental and social sources: The social context of stress. In L. Goldberger & S. Breznitz (Eds.), *Handbook of stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects* (2nd ed., pp. 303-315). New York: The Free Press.

Pines, A. M. (1987). Sex differences in marriage burnout. *Israel Social Science Research*, *5*, 60-75.

Pines, A. M. (1993). Burnout. In L. Goldberg & S. Breznitz (Eds.), *Handbook of stress: Theoretical and clinical aspects* (pp. 386-402). New York: The Free Press.

Richardson, P. M. (2004). Possible influences of Arabic-Islamic culture on the reflective practices proposed for an education degree at the higher colleges of the technology in the United Arab Emirates. *International Journal of Development*, *24*, 429-436.

Wheaton, B. (1983). Stress, personal coping resources, and psychiatric symptoms: An investigation of interactive models. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *24*, 208-229.

**Kulik Liat** is an associate professor of sociology at Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel. Her main research interests are in the areas of gender, spousal life in cultural context, parenthood, and families in later life.

---