EXPLORING THE RELATIONS BETWEEN STUDENT CYNICISM AND STUDENT BURNOUT  

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Summary.—Research on the negative effects of student cynicism has been limited, especially regarding its relation to student burnout. This study examined the relations among student cynicism (policy cynicism, academic cynicism, social cynicism, and institutional cynicism) and student burnout, as evidenced by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, in a sample of 276 Chinese undergraduates. Hierarchical multiple regressions showed that four aspects of student cynicism together explained substantial variance in student burnout. Policy cynicism was the strongest contributor to emotional exhaustion. Social cynicism was the primary contributor to depersonalization, and also to reduced personal accomplishment. Student cynicism overall had the strongest relationship with reduced sense of personal achievement. The findings outline the negative functional relations between student cynicism and student burnout.

Application of the concept of burnout has been gradually broadened from employees within an occupational context to people in all kinds of groups and contexts, including academic (Balogun, Helgemoe, Pellegrini, & Hoeberlein, 1996; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen, & Jokela, 2008). Previous studies underscore how student burnout has become a common global phenomenon among college students. International research on student burnout has used several measures to show that physical and psychological exhaustion, depersonalization, and disengagement are clear indicators of burnout among college students (Maroco & Tecedeiro, 2009; Campos, Zucoloto, Bonafé, Jordani, & Maroco, 2011; Maroco & Campos, 2012). Lian, Yang, and Wu (2005, 2006) examined three dimensions of stu-
dent burnout in a Chinese academic context. They found that in this Chinese academic context student burnout is composed of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. The regression analysis showed that affective commitment was the most significant predictor of burnout for undergraduate students in a Chinese academic setting.

Research suggests that common factors in burnout include biographical characteristics, personality characteristics, work-related attitudes, and work and organizational characteristics (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Others have theorized that burnout is caused by a loss of resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993), an imbalance between conscious and unconscious functions (Garden, 1991), or a failed quest for existential meaning (Pines, 1993). Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) and Ambrose and Kulik (1999) stated that burnout is caused by frustration and negative beliefs due to unmet expectations for the future. A cynical attitude in the student context is a kind of negative belief created by the perceived mismatch between students’ expectations of college and how they perceive the reality of their college experience. These cynical attitudes might be connected to various outcomes such as dissatisfaction, a lower sense of well-being, negative emotions, and even the decision to withdraw from college (Tinto, 1993; Brockway, Carlson, Jones, & Bryant, 2002). Simha, Elloy, and Huang’s (2014) Conservation of Resource theory suggests that people with cynical attitudes would be likely to protect themselves from further loss of resources by experiencing burnout, so that it prevents them from investing more energy.

The current study focuses on specific attitudes (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), namely, cynical attitudes, and tests their relations to student burnout in a group of Chinese college students.

Cynicism and Burnout

Cynical expectation theory proposes that the origin of cynicism is the perceived mismatch between expectations and reality, e.g., expectations of college students in their college environment. In such a situation, feelings of disillusionment appear (Brockway, et al., 2002). Students’ cynicism can be defined as having negative attitudes about different aspects of the college experience (Cowley, Rogelberg, Fisher, & Bachiochi, 1998; Brockway, et al., 2002, p. 210). This cynicism consists of both cognitive and affective components, as well as behavioral intentions (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Students may experience different types and severity of cynical attitudes toward their academic environment, social environment, policy environment, and institutional environment. Cynicism has both negative and positive outcomes (Brockway, et al., 2002).

The classical job demands–resources model of burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) proposes
that the sources of burnout come mainly from high job demands (e.g., work overload, role conflict, and emotional demands) and lead to negative health outcomes like mental and physical health and poor work performance (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Extending burnout theory to the college environment, student burnout arises from high course demands (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002) or negative beliefs and attitudes (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Cynical attitudes, therefore, may be a negative outcome of student burnout. Student burnout is defined as a tri-factorial, psychological syndrome comprising: a state of exhaustion due to heavy course demands; a cold and detached attitude toward the college life; and a feeling of low efficacy and academic achievement (Schaufeli, et al., 2002).

**Cynicism Versus Burnout**

To clarify the relationships and meanings of student cynicism and student burnout, cynicism and depersonalization can be compared and differentiated in terms of definition, function, and measurement. Depersonalization is defined as a student’s cold and detached attitude toward his college degree. The concept of depersonalization puts special emphasis on a cold and detached attitude towards one’s college degree, an attitude that expresses itself as a kind of passive response. In contrast, student cynicism emphasizes the specific impact of students’ cynical attitudes toward his academic environment, social environment, policy environment, and institutional environment. Cynicism is a constructive way of coping with a world that is perceived as less than it could, or should, be (Mirvis & Kanter, 1989). As such, cynicism is a type of positive (adaptive) response to an unsatisfactory environment, a response that may be expressed as a critical attitude or a strong emotional response. Anderson (1996) considered that cynicism should be conceptualized as including expression of broader factors including hopelessness, disillusionment, contempt, and distrust.

Although both cynicism and depersonalization share the common factor of psychological distance, cynicism focuses on the broader context that generates cynical attitudes, whereas depersonalization is the attitude directed at a target with which one is involved (i.e., academic degree or learning) (Salanova, et. al., 2005). This study differentiates between these two concepts based on: the type of attitudes (cold/cynical); the direction of target, i.e., the type of environment involved; and the broader scope of attitudes (broader/limited).

The functions of depersonalization and cynical attitudes differ. Depersonalization is a defense mechanism (Schaufeli, et al., 2002) of increased psychological distance from a problematic situation (Salanova, Llorens, Garcia-Renedo, Burriel, Bresc, & Schaufeli, 2005), and is likely to contribute to health problems. Student cynicism, in contrast, is a negative attitude toward the college experience. A positive outcome of a cynical attitude may
be that students choose to participate in activities where their voices (complaints) can be heard. Student demands for improvement may help improve the institution and decrease their cynicism. Student cynicism’s negative outcomes include poor performance, dissatisfaction, and deliberate physical and psychological withdrawal (Brockway, et al., 2002).

The measures of cynicism and depersonalization are separate and distinct. Depersonalization is measured as one of the dimensions of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Salanova, Llorens, Garcia-Renedo, Burriel, Bresc, and Schaufeli (2005) showed that cynicism and depersonalization are separate dimensions. Salanova, et al.’s study showed that cynicism was associated with depersonalization ($r^2 = .45, p < .01$) in both samples.

Brockway, et al., (2002) developed the Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (CATCS) as an effective and reliable instrument that makes a clear distinction between depersonalization and cynicism. The CATCS includes four reliable dimensions of student cynicism: policy cynicism—a negative and cynical attitude caused by a mismatch between what the administration and administrators say and do; academic cynicism—negative attitudes caused by a context or condition in which courses and/or faculty have low or inconsistent value and thereby do not meet students’ expectations; social cynicism, i.e., dissatisfaction with social aspects of the school context; and institutional cynicism, negative attitudes toward the institution as a whole. The CATCS is a reliable and valid scale of student cynicism. Brockway, et al. (2002) collected data from 1,049 students representing three college samples, and demonstrated internal reliability (Policy $\alpha = .75$, Academic $\alpha = .70$, Social $\alpha = .75$, and Institutional $\alpha = .84$ subscales) and cross-sample generalizability tested by Joreskög and Sörbom (1996) [$\chi^2(129, N = 990) = 669.34, $ RMSEA = .068, GFI = .93, CFI = .90$], and it provided an acceptable goodness of fit to the data of the LUC sample [$\chi^2(129, N = 496) = 367.34, $ RMSEA = .063, GFI = .92, CFI = .91$], the UNL sample [$\chi^2(129, N = 257) = 276.05, $ RMSEA = .059, GFI = .90, CFI = .89$], and the USAFA sample [$\chi^2(129, N = 237) = 231.27, $ RMSEA = .063, GFI = .92, CFI = .90$]. The four-factor CATCS could be generalized across a wide range of college institutions.

The Present Study

People who have cynical attitudes might be more likely to have feelings of burnout. Johnson and O’Leary-Kelly (2003) found that affective cynicism was significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = .42$). Neto (2006), in a sample of Portuguese students, reported that social cynicism was positively correlated with loneliness ($r = .27$). Individuals with high social cynicism are likely to view the interpersonal world as an exasperating struggle that requires watchfulness; cynics view others as objects to be used and manipulated, but rarely trusted (Smith & Frohm, 1985). Cynical
Attitudes are associated with negative emotions ($r = .39$; Abraham, 2000). Abraham (2000) also found that organizational cynicism explained 42% of the total variance in alienation. Clark (1994) indicated that people with high cynicism scores might feel angrier; thus, in theory, cynical attitudes are suggested to lead to negative outcomes such as poor performance, dissatisfaction, and deliberate physical and psychological withdrawal (Brockway, et al., 2002). Johnson and O’Leary-Kelly (2003) showed that affective cynicism fully mediated the relation between psychological contract breach and emotional exhaustion by using structural equation models [$\chi^2 = 17 (N = 9), p = .05; NFI = 0.991, RMSEA = 0.093$]. Dyrbye, Thomas, and Shanafelt (2005) found that cynicism may result in a loss of empathy and decreased humanism. Policy cynicism in particular, whereby students have been on campus long enough to experience administrative decisions and resultant negative changes in their college experience, is found to contribute to negative emotions such as distress (Dean, et al., 1998).

Previous studies have explored the relationship between cynicism and student burnout empirically. Salmela-Aro, Kuru, Leskinen, and Nurmi (2009) found that cynicism was associated with student exhaustion, one of the symptoms of student burnout. But their research did not examine other dimensions of burnout. In China, the complex bureaucracy and unmet expectations regarding college policies might contribute to students' feelings of disappointment (Xie, Chen, Zhang, & Hong, 2011). Chinese students believe that the current college environment does not effectively support their personal development, since the colleges’ bureaucratic systems are difficult to navigate and make students feel nervous and stressed, leading them to harbor extremely negative attitudes toward college life (Xie, et al., 2011). When the Chinese schools’ policies are rigid, impersonal, and non-responsive to the students’ individual needs, students feel frustrated (Tian, 2013). The more energy they put into trying to unsuccessfully resolve bureaucratic problems, the more frustration and emotional exhaustion increase (Yang, Li, & Cai, 2013). Xie, et al. (2011) found there was a significant negative relationship between college students’ cynical attitudes and satisfaction with life.

Although the previously mentioned studies suggest a relation between cynical attitudes and burnout, these studies have not empirically tested the whole framework of cynicism and burnout, especially the relations between factors of students’ cynical attitudes and the dimensions of student burnout. This study’s goal is to test how specific cynical attitudes relate to student burnout.

**Hypothesis.** All dimensions of cynicism (Policy cynicism, Academic cynicism, Social cynicism, Institutional cynicism) will be positively related with all dimensions of student burnout (emotional
exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of achievement).

**Method**

**Participants**
Undergraduates from three highly ranked major Chinese universities were surveyed. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed 276 were completed, representing a 78.9% response rate. The students were selected from seven classes that had 50 or more students per class, and represented multiple academic departments. The students were invited and completed the questionnaires anonymously after volunteering. The study was in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, as no institutional review was available.

**Measures**
The participants rated all questionnaires, namely, the Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (CATCS) and the Student Burnout Questionnaire (SBQ). All measures used in the current analysis were developed originally in English. As recommended by Merenda (2005), the assessment tests were adapted before the test administration to ensure effective translation. In order to apply these scales in a Chinese context, the questionnaires were first translated from English into Chinese. Next, the Chinese versions were assessed by two native English researchers independently and then items were compared by a third person. The discrepancies between these two versions were resolved by consensus; clarity and understandability were verified in a pilot study (see Xie, et al., 2011).

**Student cynicism.**—College cynical attitudes were measured with the average of 24 items adapted from the Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (Brockway, et al., 2002). Each item contained a 5-point scale with anchors 1: Strongly disagree and 5: Strongly agree. Twenty-four items were divided into four dimensions: Policy cynicism (6 items, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$; e.g., “What the administration does is different from what they say they’re going to do” and “Policies made by the administration cause more problems than they solve”); Academic cynicism (6 items, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$; e.g., “Faculty here generally don’t care enough about the needs of their students” and “For many of my courses, going to class is a waste of time”); Social cynicism [6 items, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$; e.g., “It takes a great deal of effort to find fun things to do here” and “The social environment here is similar to what I expected” (reverse scored)]; and Institutional cynicism [6 items, $\alpha = .89$; e.g., “I am proud to say I am a student at this institution” (reverse scored) and “I’m glad I chose to attend this college” (reverse scored)]. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored, then ratings averaged across items to provide subscale scores and an overall score.
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for student cynicism; higher scores are indicative of higher student cynicism. The internal consistency reliability of the total scale was satisfactory (Cronbach’s α = .91) in this sample.

The four-factor model had an acceptable goodness of fit. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed, yielding the following indices \( \chi^2 (47) = 110.97, \frac{\chi^2}{df} = 2.36; \ GFI = 0.94, \ AGFI = 0.90; \ NFI = 0.90; \ CFI = 0.94, \ IFI = 0.94; \ RMR = 0.05, \ RMSEA = 0.07, \ p = .02 \). The results supported the original factor structure in the Chinese version.

Student burnout.—The Student Burnout Questionnaire was derived from Maslach and Leiter (1997) and was adapted to Chinese by Lian, et al. (2005). Respondents indicated the extent to which they endorsed statements about their attitude on a 7-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Strongly inconsistent and 7: Strongly consistent. Three dimensions with the 20 items include Emotional exhaustion (8 items, α = .78; e.g., “I feel emotionally drained by my studies” and “I feel tired when I get up in the morning and I have to face another day at the university”), Depersonalization (6 items, α = .74, e.g., “I doubt the significance of my studies” and “I have become less enthusiastic about my studies”), and Reduced personal accomplishment (6 items, α = .71; e.g., “I feel stimulated when I achieve my study goals” and “During class, I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done”). By reverse-scoring negatively worded items, then averaging ratings across items to provide an overall result of student burnout, scaled scores were obtained. Higher scores are indicative of higher student burnout. The internal consistency reliability was α = .90 for all three dimensions in this sample. Previous research has reported α = .87 (Lian, et al., 2006). The three-factor model provided an acceptable goodness of fit based on indices from CFA \( \chi^2 (23) = 52.69, \frac{\chi^2}{df} = 2.29; \ GFI = 0.96, \ AGFI = 0.92; \ NFI = 0.91; \ CFI = 0.95, \ IFI = 0.95; \ RMR = 0.04, \ RMSEA = 0.06, \ p = .01 \).

Control variables.—The students’ sex, age, grade, major, and place of birth were obtained, since these could co-vary with independent and dependent variables (Brockway, et al., 2002; Lian, et al., 2006).

Procedure and Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS Version 15.0. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s αs (for the scaled variables), and Pearson correlations were used to explore the relationships among the measured variables. To assess the relationships among the four student cynicism subscales and the three student burnout subscales, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and Cronbach’s αs. Zero-order correlations between scores on the four dimensions
of student cynicism and three dimensions of student burnout were significant and positive. Policy cynicism, for example, was most strongly associated with Emotional exhaustion ($r = .36$, $p < .01$), and Social cynicism was most strongly correlated with Depersonalization ($r = .34$, $p < .01$). Social cynicism yielded the strongest correlations with Reduced personal accomplishment ($r = .40$, $p < .01$).

Table 2 presents a summary of results for hierarchical regression analyses, showing that the control variables of sex, age, grade, major, and place of birth of participant explained a combined 6.7% of variance in the model for Emotional exhaustion, 7.1% for Depersonalization, and 7.2% for Reduced personal accomplishment.

Three separate regression equations were computed for Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced personal accomplishment. Policy cynicism and Social cynicism explained a combined 17.7% of the variance ($F = 29.34$, $p < .001$) in Emotional exhaustion. Policy cynicism, Social cynicism, and Institutional cynicism explained a combined 15.7% of the variance ($F = 16.89$, $p < .001$) in Depersonalization (Table 2). Academic cynicism, Social cynicism, and Institutional cynicism explained a combined 21.5% of the variance ($F = 33.56$, $p < .001$) in Reduced personal accomplishment.

**Discussion**

The results indicated that the subscales of student cynicism were positively correlated with scores on Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced personal achievement, supporting the hypothesis. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Xie, et al., 2011), this study extends both the student cynicism model (Brockway, et al., 2002) and the
Burnout model (Schaufeli, et al., 2002; Gan & Shang, 2007; Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). Students who had higher cynicism were more likely to report higher scores on Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced personal accomplishment. Student cynicism explained about one-fifth of the variance in student burnout.

The results indicate that cynical attitudes are related to student burnout, but causal relations would need to be assessed in a longitudinal study. Whereas prior studies tested the effect of an overall cynical attitude (Billings, Lazarus, Wenrich, Curtis, & Engelberg, 2011), this study used a multidimensional measure of cynical attitudes. The results extended the model of cynicism (Edelwich & Brodsk, 1980; Ambrose & Kulik, 1999; Brockway, et al., 2002) and affirmed the relation of cynicism and burnout in a Chinese student sample.

Policy cynicism and Social cynicism were both positively linked to Emotional exhaustion. This result is congruent with Edelwich and Brodsky’s (1980) and Ambrose and Kulik’s (1999) research that shows that burnout is caused by frustration and negative beliefs due to unmet expectations for the future. Cynical attitudes are linked to negative emotions (Abraham, 2000). Cynical policy perception contributes to negative

### Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Prediction of Student Burnout by Student Cynicism: Sample (N = 276)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Emotional Exhaustion</th>
<th>Depersonalization</th>
<th>Reduced Personal Accomplishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$p$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic major</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables $R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy cynicism</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic cynicism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cynicism</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional cynicism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full model $R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.18†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>29.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‡ p < .001.
emotions such as distress (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadker, 1998). Johnson and O’Leary-Kelly (2003) also found that individuals with strong affective cynicism reported the highest scores on emotional exhaustion. Individuals with high social cynicism may view the interpersonal world as an exasperating struggle (Smith & Frohm, 1985). Thus, social cynicism was positively related to emotional exhaustion.

There might be some interesting connections between social cynicism and depersonalization. Those individuals with high social cynicism have less satisfying social networks across most interpersonal domains because of their competitive stance, and they might engage in poor strategies to handle relationship conflict (Li, Zhou, & Leung, 2011). Singelis, Hubbard, Her, and An (2003) suggested that social cynicism is related negatively to interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility. Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson (1995) suggested that cynical perceptions contribute to diminished trust and low-level intergroup cooperation. Without interest in the school’s social environment, students might gradually lose interest in getting involved in college activities and develop a depersonalized response to college life and course work.

The theoretical perspective of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains how social and cultural factors influence initiative and how intrinsic motivation can be developed through conditions that support the individual’s “experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.” Researchers have indicated that a lack of “academic and social engagement” is a good predictor of dissatisfaction with one’s college experience and decisions to quit school (e.g., Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Tinto, 1993). This cynicism and sense of powerlessness about influencing their social environment might be related to a reduced sense of accomplishment among Chinese students (Tian, 2013; Yang, et al., 2013). Similarly, in the current study social cynicism was the strongest contributor to reduced personal achievement.

This study has limitations. The cross-sectional data did not allow causal inferences. Longitudinal analysis would be beneficial for further understanding the student burnout phenomena. The present results suggest several hypotheses that might be tested. Overall the effects were small to medium, accounting for 15 to 23% of the total variance. One of the reasons might be that student burnout is caused by course demands or other college stressors. Cynical attitudes are likely only one of the negative factors in the complex process of burnout. The remaining question is how cynical attitudes are related to burnout. For example, students with strongly cynical attitudes could have various attribution styles (Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1978), coping styles (Xu, Shi, & Ning, 2012), personalities (Zeng, 2014), psychological capital (Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, &
Cynicism and burnout in students (Li, 2005), and motivations (Rubino, Lukyte, Perry, & Volpone, 2009). These variables’ interactive effects with cynicism and burnout have not been explored. Ways to buffer the negative effects of cynicism and improve outcomes are valuable directions for future study. Finally, it would be interesting to characterize the process of student burnout in ethnically, culturally, and demographically diverse groups.

REFERENCES


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