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The SAS Project: Motivation and Well-Being in Adjunct vs. Tenure-track Faculty

Nathan C. Hall
(McGill University)

Background

Over the past few decades, researchers have increasingly examined how post-secondary faculty are responding psychologically to the rapidly changing nature of learning, instruction, and scholarship in higher education. Faculty are increasingly faced with heightened demands and international competition for teaching, research, and service excellence despite a lack of commensurate resources and increasing employment precarity (casualization; Biron et al., 2008; Byrne et al. 2013; McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010). Recent international surveys of post-secondary faculty show stress levels to have increased significantly over the past two decades (e.g., Catano et al., 2010; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008) with sizeable proportions reporting mental health problems resulting from academic stress (e.g., depression, anxiety; U.K: 55%; Kinman & Wray, in press). Empirical research further shows faculty stress to exceed that of other university staff, professional occupations, and the general population (e.g., Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Winefield et al., 2003), with increasing academic employment demands consistently cited as contributing to greater occupational burnout and mental health challenges (Demerouti et al., 2001; Lackritz, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Watts & Robertson, 2011; Zhong et al., 2009). Given direct links between faculty well-being and research/teaching performance (Blix et al., 1994), recent research has focused on identifying critical social-environmental antecedents of faculty well-being and burnout (for reviews, see Sabagh et al., 2018; Salimzadeh et al. 2017).

Findings on social-environmental contributors to faculty well-being consistently demonstrate the harmful effects of excessive job demands and overwork on burnout levels (Anderson, 2006; Fernet et al., 2004; Navarro et al., 2010; Rothmann et al., 2008). High teaching loads and large class sizes are consistently found to negatively impact faculty well-being (e.g., Gonzalez & Bernard, 2006; Lackritz, 2004; Watts & Robertson, 2011), with studies also highlighting the psychological costs of contentious interactions with students (Frisby et al., 2015) and online instruction (Hogan & McKnight, 2007), as well as research and administrative demands (Gomes et al., 2013; Vera et al., 2010). Research also underscores the role of social support in mitigating faculty burnout (Jamal & Baba, 2001; Otero-López et al., 2008; Singh & Bush, 1998), with higher burnout reported by faculty who report unsupportive relationships with administrators or colleagues (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Rothmann et al., 2008; Siegall & McDonald, 2004; van Emmerik, 2002). Faculty who report inequities in pay and benefits have also been found to exhibit poorer emotional well-being (Smith et al., 2008), with faculty who perceive themselves as having lower personal autonomy over their academic work similarly reporting greater burnout (Fernet et al., 2004).

Despite faculty rank being associated with substantial disparities in academic demands, influence, and job security, most existing research shows no differences in well-being based on rank or tenure status (Blix et al., 1994; Fernet et al., 2004; Li et al., 2013; McClenahan et al., 2007) with publications reporting significant differences being more than 15 years old and showing mixed results (e.g., higher burnout for assistant vs. tenured faculty, Singh et al., 1998; lower burnout for adjuncts vs. tenure-track faculty; Lackritz, 2004). However, more recent data highlights not only a steadily

increasing proportion of non-tenure-track faculty (e.g., U.S.: 73%; AAUP, 2018) but also the unique challenges faced by contingent (sessional, adjunct) faculty with respect to teaching loads (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011), governance (Degeneffe & Offutt, 2008), mistreatment by colleagues (Cronin & Smith, 2011), autonomy (Levin & Shaker, 2011), and stress (Reevy & Deason, 2014). Recent qualitative findings with 100 casualised U.K. academics similarly show anxiety, isolation, and mental illness to be exacerbated by contractual employment and institutional cultures promoting overwork in the absence of workplace autonomy or security (Loveday, 2017). The psychological health of contingent faculty in Canada in particular has received significant international attention following a CAUT (2018) survey with 2,600+ contract academic staff showing 69% to report mental health problems due to stressful work conditions, with women and racialized contract faculty being more likely to find their work extremely stressful. In an effort to provide a more in-depth examination of potential disparities between faculty on both psychological and physical health variables as a function of rank, the present study further examined potential differences in adjunct vs. tenure-track faculty across Canada the U.S. on varied established indicators of motivation and well-being.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Faculty participants ($N = 2,204$) employed at post-secondary institutions in the U.S. (88.4%) and Canada (11.6%) were recruited predominantly via social media (Facebook: 43%, Twitter: 49%; blogs/web/email: 8%) as part of a larger international data collection effort examining self-regulation and academic success in higher education (Hall, 2015, 2016, 2017). Participants' mean age was 39.7 years, mean academic employment was 7.6 years, 73.7% of the sample identified as female, 7.7% self-identified as ethnic minority, and a total of 44 academic disciplines were represented (e.g., 27.4% humanities, 29.3% social sciences, 16.9% natural sciences, 26.4% professions). Faculty were additionally recruited across academic ranks, with participants including 25.0% non-tenure-track (i.e., adjunct) faculty, 34.2% assistant professors, 23.6% associate professors, and 11.2% full professors. Participants completed an omnibus online questionnaire including demographic items (e.g., age, gender, years of employment) followed by self-report measures of self-determined motivation, occupational beliefs (job satisfaction, work-life balance, quitting intentions), global psychological health (impostor syndrome, depression, burnout), and physical health (illness symptoms). Participants were compensated by \$500 cash prize draw after study phase completion.

Study Measures

Self-determined motivation. Five measures adapted from Litalien et al. (2015) assessed faculty participants' reasons for why they persist in their academic careers including *intrinsic regulation* (e.g., career satisfies personal interests; $\alpha = .60$), *integrated regulation* (e.g., career aligns with personal values or identity; $\alpha = .55$), *identified regulation* (e.g., career facilitates expertise, knowledge gains; $\alpha = .79$), *introjected regulation* (e.g., obligations, disapproval from colleagues prevent leaving; $\alpha = .59$), and *external regulation* (e.g., career pursuits motivated mainly by salary, prestige; $\alpha = .56$).

Occupational beliefs. Measures of psychological well-being specific to the academic employment involving *job satisfaction* (Moe et al., 2010; $\alpha = .90$), *work-life balance* (Gutek et al., 1991; $\alpha = .87$) and *intention to quit* (Hackett et al., 2001; $\alpha = .85$) were also assessed.

Psychological and physical health. Established self-report measures of global psychological health were also assessed to evaluate participants' levels of *depression* (Andresen, 1994; $\alpha = .88$), *emotional exhaustion* (Maslach et al., 1996; $\alpha = .91$); and *impostor syndrome* (i.e., feeling like a fraud despite success; Clance, 1985; $\alpha = .87$). Physical health was also assessed by asking faculty participants to report their physical illness symptoms experienced over the past month (e.g., sleep problems, headaches, muscle tension, poor appetite; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; $\alpha = .72$).

Results

MANCOVA analyses were conducted across all self-report psychological measures controlling for country, gender, and ethnicity as covariates, with faculty rank evaluated as independent variable (adjunct faculty, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor). Results showed a significant omnibus effect of faculty rank, $F(36,4057.41) = 7.79, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.821$, partial $\eta^2 = .065$, across all outcomes except integrated motivation and work-life balance; $F_{range}(3,13.02-846.19) = 2.54-35.86, .055 \leq p < .001, .005 \leq \text{partial } \eta^2 \leq .072$.

As shown in Figure 1, assistant professors reported the highest levels of intrinsic motivation, associate professors reported the greatest emotional exhaustion, and full professors reported the lowest introjected motivation and impostor syndrome in relation to other faculty ranks. However, the most striking pattern of results showed adjunct faculty to consistently report the lowest levels of self-determined motivation (identified, external) and notably poor levels of psychological and physical health with respect to not only occupational variables (job satisfaction, quitting intentions) but also global well-being indicators (depression, exhaustion, illness).

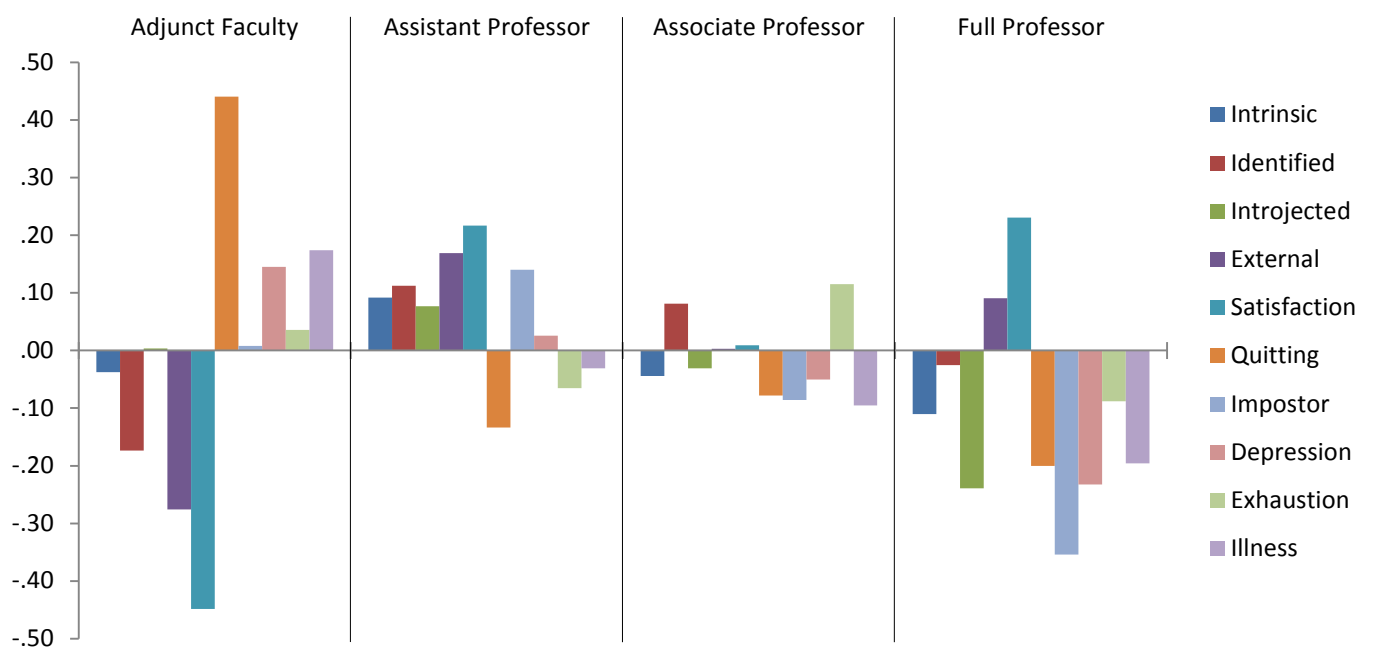


Figure 1. Significant academic rank effects on motivation and well-being (Z-score means statistically adjusted for country, gender, and ethnicity as covariates).

Discussion

Consistent with recent findings internationally showing post-secondary faculty who are not on the tenure track (i.e., adjunct, sessional, contingent faculty) to experience specific challenges with respect to job security, work load, and inclusion leading to mental health difficulties, these findings clearly demonstrate a more problematic profile of performance motivation, psychological health, and physical illness when contrasting non-tenure-track vs. tenure-track faculty. As a complement to recent studies with U.K. casualized academic staff (Loveday, 2017) and Canadian contingent faculty (CAUT, 2018) reporting troublingly high levels of stress and mental health problems in this faculty population as a function of the precarious nature of their academic employment, these results reveal precarious faculty to be consistently disadvantaged relative to their tenure-track peers on not only indicators of self-determined motivation but also various reliable indicators of psychological and physical health.

It perhaps not surprising that adjunct faculty reported a significantly lower likelihood of staying in their position due to money or prestige (external regulation) relative to tenure-track faculty due to well-known salary disparities. However, adjunct faculty additionally reported being less motivated by the potential for their academic position to help maintain or improve their expertise or skills, suggesting that adjunct faculty may also perceive fewer opportunities for professional development as a function of their employment status. Although it is notable that adjunct faculty did not report greater concerns over disapproval by colleagues (introjected regulation) or feeling less competent than their peers (impostor syndrome), they nevertheless reported significantly poorer levels of job satisfaction, burnout, depression, and illness relative to other faculty ranks, and were significantly more motivated to leave the profession. In sum, these findings contribute to an emerging literature underscoring the clear psychological challenges faced by precarious, non-tenure-track faculty due to inequitable academic employment conditions (e.g., overwork, job insecurity, poor financial compensation) and highlight the immediate need for relevant administrative policies (e.g., workloads, professional development) or collective action to support this essential yet undervalued academic population.

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