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Emotional Labor, Role Overload, and Burnout: Understanding Workplace Struggles of High School Teachers

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Abstract

The current research was carried out to explore emotional labor (EL), role overload (RO), and burnout among high school teachers. It was hypothesized that there is a significant correlation between emotional labor, burnout, and role overload among high school teachers. To study the variables, the Teacher Emotional Labor Strategy Scale (TELSS), Riley's Role Overload Scale, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) were employed, all of which have reliable psychometric properties. A cross-sectional research design with a convenient sampling technique was used for data collection from 150 high school teachers, both male 24 and female 126 with an age range from 22 to 60 years, teaching in Rawalpindi and Islamabad public and private schools. The results of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation denoted that Emotional Labor and its sub-scales, Surface Acting and Deep Acting, were found to have a significant positive correlation with Role Overload. Emotional Labor was also significantly positively correlated with Burnout and its sub-scales (Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization). Burnout and its sub-scales were found to have a substantial positive correlation with role overload. Emotional exhaustion and surface acting were revealed to be significantly positively correlated. Emotional exhaustion and deep acting did not have a significant correlation, whereas emotional exhaustion and role overload were revealed to be significantly positively correlated. The study will be helpful for educationists and policymakers at the school level to understand Emotional labour, Role overload, and Burnout associated with teachers' performance and well-being at the workplace.

Keywords: *Emotional Labor, Deep Acting, Surface Acting, Role Overload, Burnout, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, High School Teachers*

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1. Introduction

Burnout in teaching is a state of exhaustion caused physically, emotionally, and mentally by prolonged stress and overwork, often resulting from heavy workloads, limited resources, high-stakes testing, emotional demands, and lack of autonomy. It manifests in symptoms such as chronic fatigue, insomnia, irritability, reduced productivity, and cognitive difficulties. Addressing burnout requires professional development, workload management, adequate resources, positive school culture, and work-life balance to improve teachers' well-being and effectiveness (Leiter et al., 2014; Borrelli et al., 2014; Chan, 2006; Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012).

Role overload (RO) and emotional labor (EL) are widely recognized as key predictors of burnout. RO occurs when job demands exceed the available resources, leading to stress, negative attitudes, and reduced performance (Jeon et al., 2022). EL refers to the effort, planning, and regulation required to display emotions that align with organizational expectations during interpersonal interactions (Kariou et al., 2021). Recent evidence further indicates that both RO and EL are strongly linked to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Smith, Sheridan, Duursma, & Alonzo, 2025). Together, this body of evidence suggests that teachers, who are simultaneously required to manage high workloads and regulate their emotional displays, may be particularly vulnerable to burnout.

In the South Asian context, particularly in Pakistan, the impact of role overload (RO) and emotional labor (EL) on burnout among teachers appears to be amplified due to cultural and systemic factors. Teachers in this region often face large class sizes, limited institutional resources, and heightened expectations from parents, school administrations, and broader society, which intensify role-related pressures (Afzal et al., 2019; Iqbal, Atta, & Nawaz, 2020). Moreover, cultural norms emphasizing respect for authority, emotional restraint, and collectivist values require teachers to maintain composure and positive affect in classrooms, regardless of personal stress or dissatisfaction. This expectation increases reliance on surface acting strategies, which are more strongly associated with emotional exhaustion (Murtaza et al., 2021). Consequently, Pakistani teachers experience a unique intersection of workload stressors and emotional regulation demands, making them highly susceptible to burnout. Such findings highlight the necessity of considering cultural context when interpreting the effects of RO and EL on burnout, as mechanisms identified in Western research may manifest differently in collectivist and resource-constrained educational environments.

Research shows that EL and RL significantly contribute to burnout among teachers. SA within EL predicts EE (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002, 2023; Zapf, 2002), while RL strongly forecasts burnout over time (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017, 2022; Kokkinos, 2007; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Studies indicate that positive emotional regulation can buffer these effects, whereas negative regulation increases vulnerability.

Cross-cultural findings reveal consistent patterns: increased work demands and reduced compensation intensify stress and burnout (Liu et al., 2000), with EL linked to poor well-being and attrition (Kariou et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2010). Additional studies highlight the impact of burnout on teachers' psychological health, emphasizing overlaps with stress, anxiety, and depression (Chang, 2009; Bridge et al., 2023).

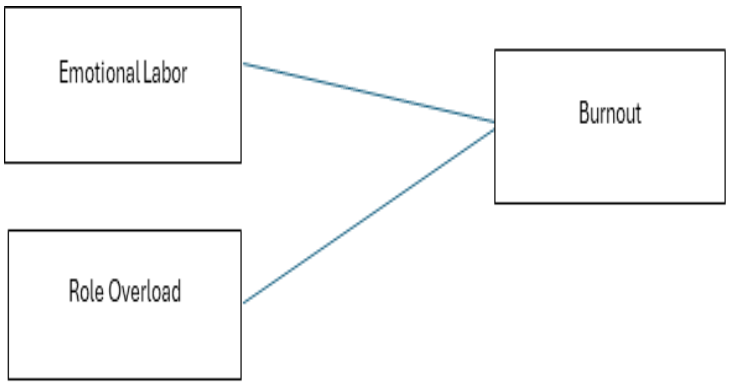
Context-specific research further substantiates these findings. For instance, Afzal et al. (2019) reported a significant association between workload and burnout among Pakistani college teachers, while Murtaza et al. (2021) found that surface acting was the predominant emotional labor strategy among university faculty, with adverse effects on their well-being and productivity. Likewise, regional investigations conducted in Dera Ismail Khan revealed varying yet concerning levels of burnout across the dimensions of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment.

Overall, literature consistently identifies EL (especially SA) and RO as critical drivers of burnout, underscoring the need for organizational support, workload regulation, and strategies that promote deep acting and healthy emotional regulation.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of emotional labor (EL) was first introduced by Hochschild (1983)**,** who explained how individuals regulate and manage their emotions through strategies such as surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA). Within the teaching profession, these strategies often contribute to emotional exhaustion (EE) and burnout (BO), as teachers suppress authentic emotions to sustain a positive classroom climate. Building on this, Kahn et al. (1964) developed role theory, proposing that individuals modify their behaviors to meet role expectations but may experience role overload when demands surpass available resources. For teachers, this often involves balancing the expectations of schools, parents, and students simultaneously, which can lead to stress and eventual burnout. Similarly, Maslach (1976, 1981) conceptualized burnout as a multidimensional construct of physical, emotional, and mental fatigue resulting from prolonged stress and overwork. She identified EE and depersonalization (DP) as its core dimensions, which manifest in feelings of being overwhelmed, emotional detachment, negative attitudes, diminished performance, perceived incompetence, and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Together, these perspectives suggest that teachers are particularly vulnerable to emotional exhaustion due to the constant emotional demands of their profession.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



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2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study implemented a cross-sectional research design to conduct research and obtain data.

2.2 Sample

A sample of 150 high school teachers was calculated by using G* power. Including both men (N=24) and women (N=126), convenient sampling was used to gather data from the participants (Lammers & Badia, 2004). The age range for the subjects is from 22 to 60 years.

2.2.1 Inclusion Criteria: Inclusion Criteria are high school teachers above the age of 21 years, and they should be currently teaching O/A levels or Matric/FSC students.

2.2.2 Exclusion Criteria: Participants who are not actively engaged in teacher duties, teachers who are on leave, and teachers with less than 6 months of teaching experience will be excluded from the study, as their current experiences may not reflect the typical teaching environment, and they may not have had sufficient exposure to the typical demands of the profession.

2.3 Measures

A set of standardized instruments was used. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) was employed to measure teachers' levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The Teacher Emotional Labor Strategy Scale (TELSS) (Yin, 2012) was used to assess the emotional regulation strategies adopted by teachers, including surface acting and deep acting. To evaluate workload-related pressures, Riley's Role Overload Scale (Riley, 1982) was administered, which measures the extent to which individuals perceive their responsibilities to exceed their available time and resources. Collectively, these instruments provided a comprehensive assessment of the psychological and occupational experiences of the participating teachers.

2.4 Procedure

Permission was obtained by the authors to get access to the scales. The sample was approached after the permission of the institutions was sought. Participants and their institutions were debriefed about the study and its resulting outcomes. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were approached via permission from their institutions to fill out questionnaires. Participants signed the consent form before filling out the questionnaires. Subjects filled out the three inventories along with one demographic sheet, including their age, gender, institution, etc., which were administered individually. 5-10 minutes were needed to complete the questionnaires. The data gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software, and conclusions were drawn. Participants were told that the study was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured. Instructions for completion, along with gratitude and acknowledgement, were given to the participants for contributing to the survey.

2.5 Ethical Statement his study was conducted with respect to the established ethical research guidelines. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the respective educational institutions. and from the authors before using the scales. The objectives and purpose of the study were explained to the participants in detail, as well as the entitlement to withdraw from the study at any time they wanted, and their informed consent to participate in the study was also procured. They were guaranteed that the data obtained would stay confidential and anonymous and only be used for the research. Lastly, no participant was exposed to any physical and/or psychological harm during the research.

3. Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics of the sample (N=150)

Variables	*f*	*(%)*
Class Level		
Matric	43	28.7
Fsc	35	23.3
O level	44	29.3
A level	28	18.7
Job Sector		
Private	132	88
Public	18	12
Age (years)		
21-30	51	34
31-40	48	32
41-50	43	28.7
50 above	8	5.3
Gender		
Male	24	16
Female	126	84
Marital Status		
Single	49	32.7
Married	101	67.3
Family System		
Nuclear	89	59.3
Joint	59	39.3
Experience		
Less than 6 months	5	3.3
6 months to 1 year	10	6.7
2-5 year	36	24
6-10 year	35	23.3
11 years and above	64	42.7

Note: *f*= frequencies of demographic variables, %= percentages.

The above table of descriptive statistics presents the frequency and percentages of the study variables. These values provide an overview of the participants' responses and the general distribution of the data.

Table 2

Correlation between Emotional Labor (Deep Acting and Surface Acting), Role Overload and Burnout (Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization) (N=150)

Variables	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
Emotional Labor	-	.26**	.29**	.77**	.78**	.32**	.28**
Role Overload	-	-	.41**	.23**	.19*	.46**	.25**
Burnout	-	-	-	**.19***	**.24****	**.86****	**.72****
Surface Acting	-	-	-	-	.33**	.30**	.26**
Deep Acting	-	-	-	-	-	.21**	.27**
Emotional Exhaustion	-	-	-	-	-	-	.60**
Depersonalization	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*p<.05, **p<.01*** p<.001

The findings indicated that emotional labour and its subscales, surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA), were significantly positively correlated with role overload (RO). Emotional labour also showed a significant positive correlation with burnout and its subscales, emotional exhaustion (EE) and depersonalization (DP). Furthermore, role overload demonstrated a significant positive correlation with burnout and its subscales.

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Table 3
Regression Coefficient of Surface Action, Deep Acting, and Role Overload on Emotional Exhaustion (N=150)

Variables	*β*	*SE*	*T*	*P*	*95%CI*
Constant	-13.4	5.06	-2.6	.009	[-23.4, -3.40]
Surface Acting	.48	.20	2.3	.019	[.079, .883]
Deep Acting	.28	.28	1	.31	[-2.7, .845]
Role Overload	1.1	.21	5.5	.001	[.757, 1.6]
R^2=.26, F=17.1, p=<.001					

CI= Confidence Interval

The results revealed that the constant value was significant. A significant positive relationship was found between surface acting (SA) and emotional exhaustion (EE), whereas the association between deep acting (DA) and EE was not significant. Additionally, role overload (RO) demonstrated a significant positive relationship with EE.

Table 4
Regression Coefficient of Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Role Overload on Depersonalization (N=150)

Variables	*β*	*SE*	*T*	*P*	*95%CI*
Constant	-5.04	3.06	-1.6	.10	[-11.1,1.01]
Surface Acting	.24	.12	1.9	.05	[-.004,.484]
Deep Acting	.39	.17	2.3	.02	[.056, .735]
Role Overload	.29	.12	2.2	.02	[.036, .547]
R^2=.14, F=8.0, p<.001					

CI= Confidence Interval

The results indicated a significant positive relationship between surface acting, deep acting, and depersonalization. Additionally, role overload was found to have a significant positive association with depersonalization.

4. Discussion

The study sought to explore the correlation between emotional labor (EL), role overload (RO), and burnout among high school teachers. In the first stage of analysis, the associations between the dimensions of EL(deep acting (DA) and surface acting (SA)), Role overload, and the burnout components-depersonalization (DP) and emotional exhaustion (EE)-were examined. In the subsequent stage, the predictive effects of SA, DA, and RO on EE were tested through regression analysis. The discussion is structured around prior empirical evidence, theoretical foundations, and the cultural context, which may have shaped the observed outcomes.

First of all, it was hypothesized that a significant relationship likely exists between emotional labor, role overload, and burnout. The findings of this research suggested that there was a significant positive link between EL and its sub-scales (DA and SA), RO and BO (EE and DP) found by the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis. This implies that role overload and burnout symptoms are more common among high school students who participate in emotional labor, especially surface acting. This result aligns with a study conducted by Brotheridge et al. (2023), which found that surface acting within EL significantly predicts EE among teachers. Similarly, a longitudinal study done by Skaalvik et al. (2022) also showed that a significant forecaster of burnout over time is role overload because, as time passes, an individual juggles increased amounts of responsibilities and roles, leading to EE and DP.

Secondly, it was hypothesized that emotional labour would lead to burnout. Teachers who engage in SA are likely to experience increased levels of burnout, and teachers who engage in deep acting will experience minimal levels of burnout. The regression analysis showed that surface acting and deep acting had varied effects on emotional exhaustion. A strong positive correlation between SA and EE was found, but not with deep acting. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Kariou et al. (2021), which showed that their systematic review's findings were in line with HŌlsheger and Schewe's meta-analysis on emotional labor within service-oriented organizations. In general, deep acting showed a positive correlation with emotional performance, whereas surface acting had a negative correlation with job satisfaction. Their analysis showed that SA is linked to higher burnout levels among teachers. This finding also concurs with a study by Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), which showed that surface acting is strongly linked with emotional exhaustion, a core element of burnout. Similarly, emotional dissonance, which is the conflict between felt and displayed emotions, can lead to increased stress and burnout among teachers (Zapf, 2002).

Thirdly, it was hypothesized that role overload would lead to increased burnout among high school teachers. The findings showed that role overload was a strong determinant of emotional exhaustion. This finding coincides with the study that was conducted by Brouwers and Tomic (2000), which investigated the linkage between emotional exhaustion, role overload, and burnout among secondary school teachers in the Netherlands. The results indicated that teachers facing greater role overload and emotional exhaustion reported substantially higher levels of burnout.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that female teachers would be higher on role overload, emotional labor, and burnout than male teachers.

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This was found to have a non-significant relationship with RL, EL, and burnout. According to Purvanova and Muros (2010), who looked at gender disparities in burnout across a variety of occupations, men reported an increased amount of DP and women a slightly increased amount of emotional exhaustion. This suggests that burnout manifests differently in each gender but does not necessarily affect one more than the other.

Limitations and Suggestions

There are several limitations to this study that should be taken into consideration. The sample comprised high school educators from the public and private sectors of Islamabad and Rawalpindi only. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to high school teachers working in other cities, such as Karachi or Lahore. Another limitation of this study is that there are limited representatives of the sample in terms of demographics, such as the distribution of participants across the private and public sectors. This restriction reduces the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study is limited due to the under-representation of male teachers in the sample, which may lead to gender biases in the findings.

There is a significant over-representation of teachers with more than 11 years of teaching experience. Moreover, the intended population consisted of secondary school educators; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to educators in other settings, such as primary, middle school, or university. Lastly, this research aimed to study the effect of emotional labor and role overload on burnout among high school teachers. However, other factors can bring about burnout that were not studied in this present research, e.g., job demands, administrative support, self-efficacy, funding, or resource availability.

Implications

There are several implications in this study that can be beneficial for high school teachers and the education sector overall. The study can help teachers, especially those who have a nuclear family system and single teachers, decrease their level of emotional exhaustion by implementing targeted interventions such as stress management programs where they focus on coping skills for the management of EL and RO.

Additionally, the study can raise awareness on how teachers are overworked and need support, especially teachers who have a nuclear family system, and it can also help implement programs that encourage family involvement, such as establishing daycares with skilled professionals. This might help reduce the emotional burdens faced by teachers to some extent. Lastly, this research revealed significant differences in EE between teachers in the public and private education sectors. Ensuring that there are sufficient resources and funding for both sectors to improve and sustain teachers' physical and mental well-being may bridge that gap.

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