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Beyond Burnout: How workplace relationships shape teacher job satisfaction

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Abstract

Teachers' job satisfaction is influenced by both occupational demands and workplace relationships. This paper develops an integrated conceptual framework examining job satisfaction among teachers in Guangdong's private undergraduate institutions in China. Drawing on six theoretical perspectives, it proposes affective commitment as a mediating mechanism linking perceived team Cha-xu climate and job burnout to job satisfaction. It highlights how relational exclusion, preferential treatment, and resource depletion may undermine teachers' organizational attachment and job satisfaction. By integrating culturally embedded relational dynamics with occupational strain, this framework advances understanding of teacher job satisfaction and provides directions for future empirical research.

Keywords: Teacher Job Satisfaction; Perceived Climate of Team Cha-xu; Relational Differentiation; Job Burnout; Affective Commitment; Private Higher Education

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1.0 Introduction

Job satisfaction is a consequential indicator of employees' evaluations of their work and working conditions. In higher education, it is associated with teachers' professional well-being and may have implications for teaching engagement, organizational commitment, and staff retention. Following Locke's (1976) value–percept perspective, job satisfaction can be understood as an evaluative response arising from the extent to which employees perceive that their work fulfils valued needs and expectations. It is therefore unlikely to be determined by a single feature of academic work. Rather, it may reflect the combined influence of workload, professional autonomy, career opportunities, interpersonal relationships, recognition, and institutional support. These issues are particularly relevant to private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province. The expansion of private higher education has heightened the importance of recruiting, developing, and retaining qualified academic staff (Zhang & Liu, 2021). At the same time, teachers in these institutions may encounter demanding teaching responsibilities, performance-oriented evaluation systems, constrained career-

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development opportunities, and uncertainty regarding occupational security (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Wang et al., 2020; Huang & Song, 2024). Such conditions provide a context in which both occupational strain and the perceived fairness of workplace relationships may shape teachers' evaluations of their jobs.

Research on occupational burnout offers one important explanation. Burnout is generally understood as a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional depletion, detached attitudes toward others, and a diminished sense of personal achievement (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Rumschlag, 2017). These dimensions capture distinct but related experiences: depleted emotional resources, increasingly detached or cynical attitudes toward work, and diminished perceptions of professional efficacy. Prior research has linked burnout with unfavorable work attitudes, including lower job satisfaction (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Nevertheless, a burnout-centred account may not fully explain how teachers interpret the relational environment in which their work takes place.

In the Chinese organizational context, differentiated interpersonal relationships may constitute a further source of variation in employees' workplace experiences. Fei Xiaotong's (1947) concept of the differential order pattern describes social relationships as networks structured by varying degrees of relational proximity and obligation. In organizational settings, such differentiation may be reflected in perceived differences in managerial attention, support, recognition, and access to resources. This paper refers to this phenomenon as the perceived climate of team Cha-xu and considers three dimensions identified in the source framework: mutual attachment, perceived favoring, and crony roles (Xia et al., 2024). These dimensions may capture different aspects of relational inclusion and insider–outsider differentiation.

A critical distinction is necessary, however. Interpersonal closeness and mutual attachment are not intrinsically unfair or harmful. Close collegial relationships may foster trust, cooperation, and social support. Their implications become problematic when strong in-group ties are exclusive, when they privilege certain employees in access to valued resources, or when they marginalize colleagues outside the network (Jabbar et al., 2026). Accordingly, the present framework does not treat every manifestation of relational closeness as negative. Instead, it distinguishes the potentially supportive function of attachment from the inequitable consequences of exclusionary or preferential practices. This distinction is important for construct validity and for deriving defensible directional hypotheses.

Affective commitment may help explain how these relational and occupational experiences are associated with job satisfaction. Affective commitment refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in their organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees' attitudes partly reflect how they interpret the support, recognition, and fair treatment they receive. Relational exclusion or sustained occupational strain may weaken employees' emotional attachment, whereas supportive and equitable treatment may strengthen it (Kilroy et al., 2023). Affective commitment may therefore represent one attitudinal pathway through which workplace experiences are associated with job satisfaction, although it is unlikely to be the only pathway.

Against this background, this paper develops a conceptual framework that integrates relational differentiation and occupational resource depletion to explain teachers' job satisfaction in Guangdong's private undergraduate higher education institutions. Specifically, it examines the proposed relationships of mutual attachment, perceived favoring, crony roles, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment with job satisfaction, and considers affective commitment as a mediator. The paper makes three intended contributions. First, it brings a culturally situated account of relational differentiation into dialogue with established organizational theories of justice and exchange. Second, it places relational conditions and burnout within a common framework without treating them as interchangeable constructs. Third, it identifies affective commitment as a plausible, but not exclusive, attitudinal mechanism and highlights conceptual and methodological issues that should be addressed before empirical testing.

Accordingly, the study has five objectives:

- To examine the relationships of mutual attachment, perceived favoring, and crony roles with teachers' job satisfaction.
- To examine the relationships of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment with teachers' job satisfaction.
- To examine the relationship between affective commitment and teachers' job satisfaction.
- To assess whether affective commitment mediates the relationships between the three dimensions of perceived climate of team Cha-xu and job satisfaction.
- To assess whether affective commitment mediates the relationships between the three dimensions of job burnout and job satisfaction.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. Job satisfaction as an evaluative outcome

Job satisfaction refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their job and work-related experiences. Locke's (1976) value–percept theory proposes that satisfaction depends, in part, on the perceived discrepancy between what employees' value and what they experience at work. In higher education, relevant experiences extend beyond classroom teaching to include workload, autonomy, collegial relationships, managerial practices, professional development, recognition, and institutional conditions. This multidimensional character is particularly pertinent to private undergraduate institutions, where performance requirements and career uncertainty may influence teachers' assessments of whether their work meets their professional expectations (Han et al., 2020). Social Exchange Theory complements this evaluative perspective by emphasizing reciprocity in employment relationships. Employees are more likely to develop favorable work attitudes when they perceive that the organization provides support, fair treatment, and valued resources. Conversely, perceived inequity and persistent strain may undermine positive evaluations (Ahmad et al., 2023). In this paper, job satisfaction is therefore treated as an outcome associated with two conceptually distinct domains: relational experiences within work teams and the psychological consequences of occupational demands.

2.2. Perceived climate of team Cha-xu and job satisfaction

Fei's (1947) differential order pattern provides a culturally grounded lens through which to consider how relational proximity may shape social interaction and obligations. Rather than assuming that relationships are governed uniformly by impersonal rules, the framework emphasizes that obligations and expectations may vary according to relational distance. When translated into organizational settings, relational differentiation may be reflected in unequal access to information, managerial support, recognition, opportunities, or other valued resources. The present paper uses perceived climate of team Cha-xu to refer to employees' perceptions of such differentiated relational patterns within their work teams. The three dimensions considered here—mutual attachment, perceived favoring, and crony roles—should not be assumed to have identical meanings or consequences. Mutual attachment may indicate emotional closeness and cohesion among team members, which can support cooperation and belonging. However, where attachment is concentrated within a closed in-group, it may also reinforce boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Perceived favoring more directly concerns the perception that particular individuals receive preferential treatment, while crony roles may capture the positioning or participation of individuals within privileged relational networks. These distinctions matter because a single negative hypothesis for all three dimensions risks conflating supportive cohesion with exclusionary differentiation.

Organizational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1987) helps explain why preferential treatment may have adverse implications. Employees assess not only the outcomes they receive but also the fairness of interpersonal treatment and the procedures through which resources and opportunities are allocated. When recognition, development opportunities, or managerial support appear to depend on personal connections rather than transparent criteria, teachers may interpret the work environment as inequitable. Social Exchange Theory further suggests that perceived inequity can weaken the perceived quality of the employment relationship and reduce positive work attitudes.

On this basis, perceived favoring and crony roles are expected to be negatively associated with job satisfaction when they signal exclusive access or unequal treatment. The relationship involving mutual attachment is more contingent. If mutual attachment reflects inclusive collegial support, it may be positively associated with satisfaction; if it reflects exclusive in-group cohesion that disadvantages other teachers, the association may be negative. Because the supplied conceptual model does not establish which meaning is captured by the measurement items, a non-directional proposition is more defensible pending item-level validation. Therefore, the study proposing:

H1a: Mutual attachment is significantly associated with teachers' job satisfaction.
H1b: Perceived favoring is negatively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.
H1c: Crony roles are negatively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.

2.3. Job burnout and job satisfaction

Job burnout is generally understood as a response to prolonged exposure to demanding work conditions. The three-dimensional model associated with Maslach and Jackson (1981) distinguishes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion reflects the depletion of emotional energy; depersonalization refers to detached or cynical attitudes toward work recipients or work-related interactions; and reduced personal accomplishment captures diminished perceptions of professional competence and achievement.

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory provides an explanation for why burnout may be associated with lower job satisfaction. Individuals seek to acquire, retain, and protect valued resources, and sustained actual or threatened resource loss can generate strain (Hobfoll, 1989). In academic work, heavy teaching loads, administrative responsibilities, continuous performance demands, and insufficient support may consume emotional and professional resources. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model similarly proposes that persistent job demands can initiate a health-impairment process, particularly when adequate job resources are unavailable (Demerouti et al., 2001).

The three burnout dimensions may be associated with job satisfaction through related but distinguishable processes. Emotional exhaustion may reduce the energy available for teaching and professional engagement. Depersonalization may erode the quality of interactions with students and colleagues and weaken the meaning attached to academic work. Reduced personal accomplishment may undermine teachers' sense that their work is effective and worthwhile. These experiences are expected to correspond with less favorable evaluations of the job. A measurement issue nevertheless requires attention: instruments derived from the Maslach Burnout Inventory may operationalize personal accomplishment in a positively worded direction. If the construct is labelled 'reduced personal accomplishment', the relevant items must be reverse-coded or otherwise scored so that higher values consistently indicate greater burnout. Therefore, the study proposing:

H2a: Emotional exhaustion is negatively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.
H2b: Depersonalization is negatively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.
H2c: Reduced personal accomplishment is negatively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.

2.4. Affective commitment and job satisfaction

Affective commitment denotes an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). It differs conceptually from continuance commitment, which is based on the perceived costs of leaving, and normative commitment, which reflects a sense of obligation to remain. Affective commitment is especially relevant to the present framework because it captures a positive emotional bond with the institution rather than a decision to stay for instrumental or obligatory reasons (Kostiv et al., 2025). From a social exchange perspective, teachers may develop stronger affective commitment when they perceive that their institution values their contributions, recognizes their professional needs, and treats them fairly (Blau, 1964). Such attachment may be associated with more favorable evaluations of the work environment. Prior work has linked organizational commitment with job-related attitudes and outcomes (Meyer et al., 2002; Woznyj et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the constructs should remain empirically distinct: commitment concerns the employee's bond with the organization, whereas job satisfaction concerns the evaluation of the job and its features. Their expected association does not make them interchangeable. Therefore, the study proposing:

H3: Affective commitment is positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction.

2.5. The mediating role of affective commitment

Affective commitment may function as an attitudinal mechanism through which workplace experiences are associated with job satisfaction. Social Exchange Theory suggests that employees interpret organizational treatment as information about whether their contributions and needs are valued. Where team relationships are perceived as exclusionary or preferential, teachers may experience reduced inclusion, recognition, and reciprocal support. These perceptions may weaken their emotional attachment to the institution, which may in turn be associated with lower job satisfaction (Wei & Huang, 2020). A similar process may operate in relation to burnout. COR Theory suggests that prolonged resource loss can undermine employees' capacity to sustain positive work-related relationships (Hobfoll, 1989). The JD-R model further explains how persistent demands and inadequate resources may contribute to strain (Demerouti et al., 2001; Ferreira & Gomes, 2022). Teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, or reduced personal accomplishment may consequently feel less psychologically connected to their institutions. Lower affective commitment may then accompany less favorable job evaluations.

The proposed mediation should be interpreted as partial and probabilistic rather than exhaustive. Relational differentiation and burnout may also be associated with job satisfaction through other mechanisms, including perceived organizational justice, work engagement, professional identity, and perceived organizational support. Moreover, the proposed cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal ordering or rule out reciprocal relationships—for example, dissatisfied teachers may perceive organizational relationships more negatively. The hypotheses therefore concern indirect statistical associations to be tested, not definitive causal processes. Therefore, the study proposing:

H4a: Affective commitment mediates the association between mutual attachment and teachers' job satisfaction.

H4b: Affective commitment mediates the negative association between perceived favoring and teachers' job satisfaction.
H4c: Affective commitment mediates the negative association between crony roles and teachers' job satisfaction.
H5a: Affective commitment mediates the negative association between emotional exhaustion and teachers' job satisfaction.
H5b: Affective commitment mediates the negative association between depersonalization and teachers' job satisfaction.
H5c: Affective commitment mediates the negative association between reduced personal accomplishment and teachers' job satisfaction.

Taken together, the proposed conceptual framework is visually presented in Figure 1.

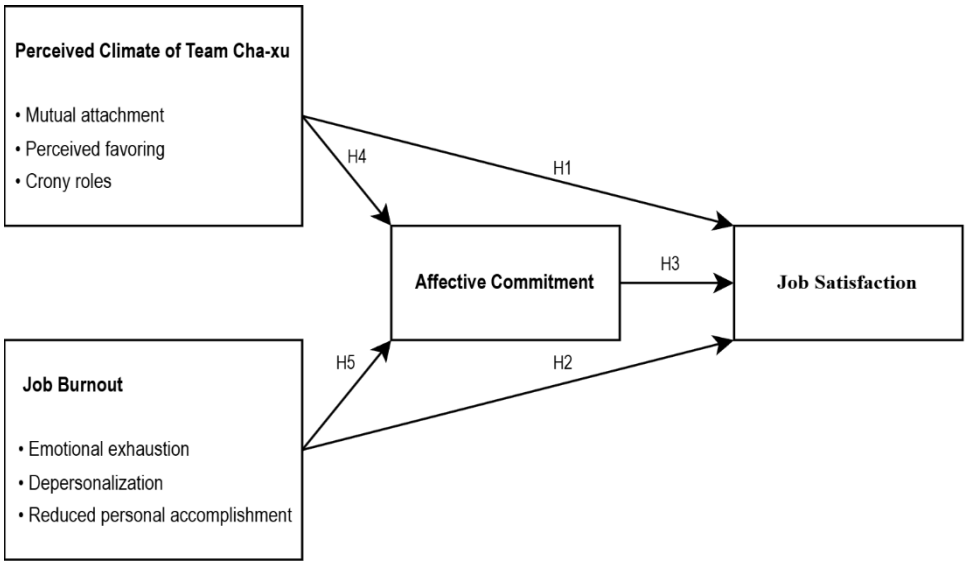


Fig 1: Proposed conceptual framework

3.0 Methodology

For subsequent empirical validation, the proposed questionnaire draws on established measures adapted to the context of private higher education institutions in China. The current measurement plan contains 75 items across eight dimensions: 32 items for perceived climate of team Cha-xu, 16 items for job burnout, six items for affective commitment, and 21 items for job satisfaction. Perceived climate of team Cha-xu is to be measured using a three-dimensional scale adapted from the differential-order perception scale reported by Xia et al. (2024), covering mutual attachment, perceived favoring, and crony roles. Burnout is to be assessed using an adapted version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, covering emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Affective commitment is grounded in Meyer and Allen's (1991) organizational commitment framework, while job satisfaction is measured using a 21-item scale adapted to university teachers. The target population comprises full-time teachers employed in private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province. The proposed eligibility criteria are: current teaching responsibilities, at least one year of teaching experience at the current institution, a minimum educational qualification of a bachelor's degree, and an age range of 30–60 years. The source study identifies 23 eligible institutions as the institutional sampling frame. These criteria should be justified explicitly in the empirical study. In particular, the age restriction may exclude younger academic staff and limit the generalizability of findings; unless there is a substantive theoretical or practical reason for the restriction, a broader age range would improve population coverage.
A stratified sampling strategy is proposed to improve institutional and geographical coverage. Where reliable institutional staffing data are available, the 23 institutions may be grouped by geographical location or relevant institutional characteristics, with sample allocations proportionate to the eligible teacher population. A self-administered questionnaire may be distributed through an online survey platform such as Wenjuanxing, supplemented by paper questionnaires where necessary. IBM SPSS and Smart-PLS are proposed for the empirical analysis, subject to the final specification of the measurement and structural models.

4.0 Discussion

4.1. Relational differentiation as a context-sensitive organizational process

The first contribution concerns the application of Fei's (1947) differential order pattern to organizational relationships. The framework draws attention to the possibility that relational proximity may shape access to information, recognition, managerial attention, and professional opportunities. Where these resources are allocated through opaque or exclusive networks, teachers may perceive the workplace as unfair. Organizational justice and social exchange perspectives help explain why such perceptions may be associated with lower satisfaction: employees may interpret unequal treatment as evidence that the organization does not value their contributions on equitable terms. At the same time, the framework cautions against treating relational closeness as inherently dysfunctional. Mutual attachment can provide social support and facilitate collaboration (Khan & Sultan, 2023). Its consequences depend on whether attachment is inclusive or exclusive, and on whether it affects access to organizational resources. This qualification is not merely contextual; it has direct implications for measurement and hypothesis testing. If the mutual-attachment items capture supportive cohesion, a negative directional hypothesis would be theoretically inconsistent. Future empirical work should therefore inspect item content and, where possible, distinguish inclusive cohesion from exclusive in-group attachment.

4.2. Burnout as an occupational resource-depletion pathway

The second contribution is to position burnout alongside relational differentiation as a distinct antecedent domain. COR Theory and the JD-R model suggest that persistent demands combined with inadequate resources can undermine teachers' emotional and professional resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Demerouti et al., 2001). Teaching, administrative work, performance assessment, and uncertainty about career development may be relevant demands in private higher education. The three burnout dimensions capture different manifestations of this strain, and should not be collapsed without theoretical and measurement justification. In particular, reduced personal accomplishment must be scored consistently so that higher values represent greater impairment.

4.3. Affective commitment as a potential explanatory mechanism

The third contribution is the proposed mediating role of affective commitment. The framework suggests that perceived exclusion or preferential treatment may weaken teachers' emotional attachment to their institutions, while prolonged burnout may make it more difficult to sustain identification and involvement. In turn, weaker affective commitment may be associated with lower job satisfaction. This pathway is consistent with social exchange reasoning, but it should not be interpreted as the sole mechanism. Perceived justice, organizational support, work engagement, and professional identity may also explain parts of the relationships. Future studies could compare competing or parallel mediation models rather than assume that affective commitment exhausts the explanatory process.

4.4. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the framework connects a culturally situated account of relational differentiation with established explanations of organizational justice, social exchange, and occupational strain. Its value lies less in simply accumulating theories than in assigning them complementary roles: differential order pattern theory contextualizes relational structure; justice and exchange perspectives explain employees' interpretations of treatment; COR and JD-R explain resource depletion; and commitment theory specifies a potential attitudinal mechanism. This integration may help generate a more context-sensitive account of job satisfaction in private higher education. For institutional practice, the framework points to two broad priorities. First, institutions should make the allocation of recognition, development opportunities, workload, and other valued resources more transparent, while fostering collegial relationships that are inclusive rather than exclusionary. Second, institutions should monitor the demands and resources associated with academic work, including teaching and administrative workload, performance evaluation, and access to professional support. These implications are provisional: the conceptual model identifies plausible areas for institutional attention but does not establish the effectiveness of any particular intervention.

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This paper develops a conceptual framework for examining teachers' job satisfaction in private undergraduate colleges and universities in Guangdong Province. It proposes that perceived climate of team Cha-xu and job burnout represent two distinct domains of workplace experience that may be associated with job satisfaction, both directly and indirectly through affective commitment. The framework's central contribution is to bring relational differentiation and occupational resource depletion into a unified account while retaining their conceptual distinctiveness.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the proposed relationships have not yet been empirically tested; they should therefore be treated as theoretical propositions rather than established effects. Second, the

meaning and measurement of mutual attachment require particular scrutiny because relational closeness may be supportive or exclusionary. Third, the reliance on adapted scales raises questions about cultural and contextual validity, especially for the Cha-xu construct.

Future research should validate the measurement structure through expert review, cognitive interviews, and pilot testing; examine whether the dimensions of team Cha-xu are empirically distinct; and test the proposed direct and indirect associations using an adequately justified sample. Longitudinal or multi-wave designs would provide stronger evidence about temporal ordering. Multi-source data, where feasible, could also reduce reliance on single-respondent perceptions. Comparative studies across public and private institutions, provinces, or national contexts may further establish the boundary conditions of the framework. In particular, future work should investigate when relational attachment functions as a source of collegial support and when it becomes a mechanism of exclusion.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper extends the understanding of teacher job satisfaction by integrating relational and occupational determinants within a unified framework and introduces a culturally grounded perspective by applying Fei's (1947) differential-order pattern to contemporary educational organizations.

Authors Contribution to Study

Author 1: Conceptualisation and writing – original draft. Author 2: Data collection, formal analysis and interpretation. Author 3: Writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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