

Burnout Level of Gassals: A Mortion Like Profession

Defined In Islamic Tradition

Ölü Yıkayıcılarda Tükenmişlik Düzeyi: İslam Geleneğinde Tanımlı Ölümlü İlişkili Bir Meslek

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Abstract

Objective: Gassal is the name of the profession which mainly involves bathing and dressing of dead bodies in gassalhome. It is a profession defined in Islamic culture and has similarities with mortician. In this study; it was aimed to determine burnout levels of gassals and to compare them with those of other workers in cemetery.

Material and Method: Fifty-seven gassals, 51 grave diggers and 45 administrative staff were included into the study. All participants were asked to answer a form for demographical variables, Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-S and STAI-T) and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI).

Results: Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment scores were insignificant within groups although there was a trend to be higher in administrative staff in depersonalization (p:0.092). There were no significances within groups among STAI-S (p:0.229) and STAI-T (p:0.233). The Beck depression score was significantly higher in morticians than administrative staff (p:0.049) while it was indifferent between morticians and grave diggers (p:0.614).

Conclusion: Burnout levels of gassals are similar to that of other staff working in cemetery. Future studies investigating psychosocial properties of gassals are needed.

Key Words: Anxiety, burnout, cemetery, gassal, mortician

Özet

Amaç: Gassallık, başlıca görevi gasilhanede ölüleri yıkamak ve kefenlemek olan meslektir. Bu meslek İslami kültürde mevcuttur ve mortisyenlik (cenaze kaldırcılığı) ile benzerlikler taşır. Bu çalışmada gassalların tükenmişlik düzeylerinin belirlenmesi ve kabristanda diğer çalışanlarla karşılaştırılması amaçlanmıştır.

Gereç ve Yöntem: Elliyeedi gassal, 51 mezar kazıcı ve 45 idari personel çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Bütün katılımcılardan demografik özelliklerini belirlemek üzere bir form, Maslach Tükenmişlik Ölçeği (MBI), State-Trait Anksiyete Ölçeği (STAI-S ve STAI-T) ve Beck Depresyon Ölçeğini (BDI) cevaplamaları istenmiştir.

Bulgular: İdari personelde depersonalizasyon alt boyutu puanlarında daha yüksek olma eğilimi varken gruplar içerisinde duygusal tükenmişlik, depersonalizasyon ve kişisel başarı alt boyut puanlarında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark bulunmamıştır (p: 0.092). STAI-S (P: 0.229) ve STAI-T (p: 0.233) ölçeklerinde gruplar arasında anlamlı fark saptanmamıştır. Beck Depresyon Ölçeği puanları cenaze kaldırcılar ve mezar kazıcılar arasında değişiklik göstermezken (p:0.614), cenaze kaldırcılarında idari personele göre anlamlı olarak daha yüksekti (p:0.049).

Sonuç: Gassalların tükenmişlik düzeyleri kabristandaki diğer çalışanlara benzerlik göstermektedir. Gassalların psiko-sosyal özelliklerini araştıran gelecek çalışmalara ihtiyaç vardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Anksiyete, tükenmişlik, kabristan, gassal, cenaze kaldırcı

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Introduction

A mortician is a professional who is enrolled in the business of funeral rites such as embalming, burial or cremation of the dead corpse. In addition, they usually are asked to perform tasks such as dressing, casketing and cosmetizing of the dead (1). In Islamic countries like Turkey, there is a profession called "gassal" which is similar to mortician in the world other than Islamic regions. Gassal is the name of the man/woman who bathes the dead body in gassalhome. Medical literature about morticians comprises some precautions about infectious diseases transmitted by blood or body fluids (2) or cosmetic consequences of embalming cream (3).

There are extensive investigations about burnout symptoms and coping strategies of professionals who deal with individuals with mortal diseases either when they are alive or after their deaths (4,5,6). However, there is a paucity of investigations focusing on anxiety or burnout levels of the morticians (i.e., gassals) who face directly with dead bodies routinely as part of their jobs. From this viewpoint, it was hypothesized that burnout levels might be higher in gassals than other workers in cemetery. Thus, in an attempt to fill this gap in the literature it was aimed to investigate the burnout levels of gassals and compare them with that of other workers in cemetery.

Methods

After obtaining the required permissions from Istanbul Municipality Administration of Cemeteries; authors visited the biggest cemetery in Istanbul and explained face to face the study to the staff of that cemetery. One hundred fifty three persons whose jobs were related with funeral rite were enrolled in the study. They were divided into three groups as gassals (n:57) who are in direct and close contact with the corpse, grave diggers (n:51) who only bury the dressed corpse and administrative staff (n:45) who work as director or assistant director in cemetery. All participants were asked to perform State and Trait Anxiety Inventory, Beck Depression Inventory and Maslach Burnout Inventory and a brief sociodemographic form in September and October 2009.

People who were uncooperative or known to be illiterate were excluded from the study. Additionally, having any neurologic, psychiatric or oncologic problem, or chronic illness were also accepted as

exclusion criterias of the study. People who failed to complete correctly the study forms were also excluded from the study. All participants gave written informed consent before enrollment.

Data collected therein were evaluated by using SPSS 16 software package. Data were analysed by using percentage and oneway Anova tests in the computer era.

Ethics:

The participation in the study was voluntary and all participants gave their approval for the study. It was not necessary to obtain the agreement of an ethics committee for the study as this is a survey which was analyzed in an anonymous manner. The study was also approved by the institutions. Before data collection, the purpose of the study was explained and each member of the volunteered care giving staff signed a consent form. The participating institutions were told, prior to the study, that the study results would be published in a medical journal in an anonymous form, to which they gave their consent.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI):

Three components of the burnout syndrome that was used to assess are; emotional exhaustion (EA, 9 items), depersonalization (DP, 5 items), and personality accomplishment (PA, 8 items) (7). It is a quantitative measure with established reliability and validity. There are 22 items, which are divided into the three subscales; EE, DP, and PA. Items are scaled from 0 to 4 with 0:never and 4:every day. Internal consistency of the MBI was established and reported using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (N=1,32). Reported reliability for the EE subscale is 0.90, DP subscale is 0.71, and PA subscale is 0.79 (7). The Turkish reliability and validity of this inventory was performed by Ergin et al., in 1993 (8).

Burnout exists as a continuum of human experience extending from low degrees of burnout to high degrees of burnout. Burnout is assessed as low, average, or high by comparing EE, DP, and PA scores to norms established for specific groups (7). EE reflects the degree of compassion fatigue experienced by the participant, and high scores are associated with increased risk of burnout. DP reflects the extent to which the participants have emotionally removed themselves from the work and high scores are consistent with burnout. PA reflects the sense of satisfaction the participant experiences with work. Low PA scores are associated with increased risk of

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burnout. The scores for all three components of burnout are used to determine the degree of burnout.

State and Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-S / STAI-T):

The patients were asked to read and sign the STAI, which consists of two different scales, each with 20 questions. The scores obtained in each test range from 20 to 80. While higher values indicate increased anxiety level, the lower scores indicate decreased anxiety level. There is no cut-off value in these tests (9). The Turkish reliability and validity of this inventory was performed by Oner et al., 1982 (10).

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI):

Depression was assessed by Beck's self-report 21-item inventory (BDI). The BDI cut-off points are <10 absence or minimal depression, 10–18 mild to moderate depression, 19–29 moderate to severe depression, and 30–63 severe depression (11). Validity and reliability studies of the BDI (Hisli 1989) for adaptation to the Turkish language have been performed (12).

Results

The mean age was significantly higher in morticians group (38.08±7.29) than in administrative staff group (32.07±9.16) (p:0.001). The duration of working in cemetery was similar in all three study groups (p:0.441). Mean financial income of the gassals was significantly higher than grave diggers (p:0.005) and lower than administrative staff (p:0.009). The mean

number of children of gassals was significantly higher than that of administrative staff (p<0.001) while there was no significance between gassals and grave diggers (p:0.920). Frequency of women in gassals group was higher than grave diggers and administrative staff (df:1, p:0.000 and df:2, p:0.002, respectively). Frequency of participants who were graduated from a religious school was significantly higher in gassals group than in other two groups (df:5, p:0.001 and df:4, p:0.000, respectively). The frequency of reporting an insufficient income was significantly lower in gassals than grave diggers (df:1, p:0.000). The frequency of being married was significantly more in gassals than administrative staff (df:3, p:0.001). Voluntarily preference to work in cemetery was significantly higher in gassals than in both other groups (df:4, p:0.034 and df:4, p:0.022, respectively). The perception of negative attitudes from relatives of corpses was significantly higher in gassals than in both other groups (df:2, p:0.021 and df:2, p:0.012, respectively) (Table 1).

Mean emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment scores were similar in all three groups although mean depersonalization score of administrative staff group showed a tendency to be the highest (p:0.092). There were no statistically significant difference between study groups in terms of STAI-S (p:0.229) and STAI-T (p:0.233). Mean BDI score was significantly higher in gassals than administrative staff (p:0.040) while it did not show statistically significant difference from that of grave diggers group (p:0.614) (Table 2).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study groups

	Gassals (n=57)	Grave diggers (n=51)	Administrative staff (n=45)
Age (mean ± SD)	38.08±7.29	36.7±7.90	32.07±9.16
Gender			
Female	33	51	34
Male	24	0	11
Marital status			
Unmarried	12	4	21
Married	45	47	24
Graduation			
Religious school	15	1	8
Regular school	42	47	37
Voluntary in job			
Yes	33	14	25
No	24	37	20
Income			
Sufficient	24	4	18
Insufficient	31	42	24

Table 2. Mean scores of Maslach Burnout Inventory, STAI-T, STAI-S and Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) in gassals, grave diggers, and other personnel

	Gassals (n=57)	Grave diggers (n=51)	Administrative staff (n=45)
Maslach Burnout Inventory			
Emotional exhaustion	6.84± 5.86	8.90± 6.23	6.78± 4.49
Depersonalization	2.81± 3.22	2.35± 2.18	3.80± 4.22
Personal accomplishment	19.72± 7.06	19.59± 6.55	19.42± 6.48
STAI-T	39.75± 10.83	41.25± 11.40	37.62± 8.36
STAI-S	54.77± 10.84	56.27± 11.36	52.62± 8.36
Beck Depression Inventory	11.28± 9.78*	9.63± 10.42	6.98± 6.04*

*Difference between the mean BDI scores of gassals and other personnel reached statistically significance level, $p=0.049$.

Discussion

To our knowledge, in the current literature there is only one study similar to this which investigated anxiety in funeral directors (13). In this study, anxiety level related to death in funeral directors was found to be associated with the number of funerals attended per year. On the other hand, that study did not report any relationship between anxiety level related to death and the number of embalming cases per year (13). However, in contrary to the study burnout levels were not determined in Harrawood’s study. Study, against our hypothesis, did not prove any difference in burnout levels among cemetery personnel including gassals, grave diggers and administrative staff. The attitudes towards the rituals about death may vary in different traditions. In a recent study, the ceremonies surrounding death were found extremely important in Aboriginal peoples and informed to take precedence over all other activities (14). For example, the traditional practices including the smoking ceremony (a spiritual ritual conducted in the deceased’s living space with the rationale of driving the deceased’s spirit away), painting ochre on all living spaces inhabited by the deceased, or alternatively of putting up "flags" (which is considered to drive away the deceased’s spirit and also to notify to the community that this is the house of a deceased) and the death ceremony (which includes practices such as keeping the deceased’s body in the home, painting the bodies of the mourners and bringing kinship communities together to share food, song and dance) are of great significance in many Aboriginal cultures (14). In Turkey, the gassals say the words “I have intended to make this died person to be taken an death ablution” at the beginning of bathing died person. In Islamic tradition ablution ritual is important for God’s sake. In addition, the gassals cover the death person with a “white and

clean sheet” after bathing him. This white sheet represents “clarity, innocence, divine light” in Islamic tradition. After covering the corpse, they pray to God to forgive the sins of that died person. Thus, the way of gassals working is traditionally accepted and encouraged according Islam. Perhaps, that is why ratio of participants who were from a religious school was higher in gassals group. Additionally, number of voluntary workers was also higher in gassals group than in administrative group. Thus, these factors might buffer burnout levels in gassals and result in indifference from other groups including grave diggers and administrative staff.

In the study, mean depressive score in gassals was observed to be higher than administrative staff. It is well known that risk factors of depression include being female and/or unmarried (15). Ratio of females in gassals group was higher than administrative staff group; however, it was visa verse for the ratio of unmarried participants. On the other hand, lower income is also a risk factor for having more prevalent distress or mental disorders (16). Parallel to this, frequency of participants reported insufficient income was higher than that of administrative staff. Thus, female gender and subjective feelings of insufficient income may account for higher levels of depression in gassals. On the other hand, the effect of stress that gassals carry due to their profession should also be kept in mind besides these factors.

Undoubtly, this study has some limitations. Small sample size of the study prohibits generalization of the findings. On the other hand, comparison of gassals with other professions not related to cemetery or death and with healthy controls might strengthen the meaning of our findings.

In conclusion, burnout levels in gassals seem to be similar to those of other staff working in cemetery.

Future studies with larger sample sizes investigating burnout and psychological distress of gassals are needed.

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