



Exploring how grassroots civil servants' professional group identification affects job burnout: Evidence from China

Chinese Public Administration Review

1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/15396754241291702

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Abstract

We sought to understand better how to alleviate job burnout among grassroots civil servants. Specifically, we studied how professional group identification alleviated their sense of relative deprivation and enhanced their motivation for public service to reduce their burnout. We conducted a vignette experiment ($N=151$) and an online survey ($N=439$) on grassroots civil servants in China. In the experiment, we manipulated professional group identification to influence burnout in both experimental and control groups. In the survey, we used scales to measure the variables we were concerned about, and used the process plug-in of SPSS to analyze and compare the mediating effects. Results revealed that higher professional group identification led to lower job burnout, and public service motivation (PSM) and group relative deprivation (GRD) played mediating roles in the causal relationship. This study examined the dual pathways through which professional group identification mitigated job burnout, surpassing current understanding of the relationship between identification and job burnout. With greater validity than ever, we provide an original perspective on alleviating job burnout in public organizations.

Keywords

Chinese grassroots civil servant, job burnout, professional group identification, group relative deprivation, public service motivation

Received 13 May 2024; revised manuscript accepted 30 September 2024

Introduction

The job burnout experienced by grassroots civil servants is a longstanding concern within the global public administration academia and government managers (Fuenzalida et al., 2024; J. Kim, 2015; Sciepora & Linos, 2022). Over an extended period, many Chinese grassroots civil servants have grappled with challenging working conditions, intricate tasks, and stringent performance assessments, making them susceptible to job burnout (Sui et al., 2023). The occurrence of job burnout among public employees has been a challenge persistently troubling the Chinese government (Hu et al., 2015; S. Lu et al., 2020; Sui et al., 2023). Addressing the issue of job burnout among grassroots civil servants emerges as a crucial imperative for advancing the development of China's cadre team in the new era (X. Chen & Xiao, 2020)

Job burnout, defined as the physical and mental exhaustion of workers, particularly those in the service industry, results from prolonged and excessive pressure (Maslach

et al., 2001). Most researchers support that job burnout encompasses emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion reflects the draining of emotional and physical energy under stress, cynicism represents a detached and negative attitude toward work, and reduced personal accomplishment indicates feelings of inefficacy, low achievement, and poor productivity (Zellars et al., 2004). In this paper, job burnout is defined as the combined effect of these three dimensions.

While existing research examining the relationship between identification and job burnout is not uncommon,

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most tend to concentrate on the roles of team identification, organizational identification, and professional identification (e.g. Avanzi et al., 2018; Frenzel et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2021; Schaible Lonnie, 2018). Individual mental health has a close association with group identification (Q. Wang & Yu, 2016). However, professional group identification has often been overlooked when discussing the antecedents of burnout in a specific occupation, as evidenced in previous studies. Therefore, we delve into the impact of grassroots civil servants' professional group identification on job burnout.

To delve deeper into the mechanism behind how the professional group identification of grassroots civil servants influences their job burnout, this study investigates the mediating impact of group relative deprivation (GRD) and public service motivation (PSM) on the connection between professional group identification and job burnout among grassroots civil servants. Firstly, GRD may serve as a potential mediating variable. Professional group identification empowers grassroots civil servants to foster group-based self-efficacy, potentially resulting in a diminished sense of GRD when compared with other groups (Raffield et al., 2016; Swann et al., 2009). This, in turn, could alleviate their job burnout. Given the significant differences in work structure, social welfare, and other aspects between civil servants (in *Ti-Zhi*) and other occupational groups (outside *Ti-Zhi*) in China, grassroots civil servants are often compared with employees in other professional sectors, such as those in private enterprises. The potential for GRD may exist for a long time. Secondly, beyond the impact of GRD, PSM might also serve as a mediating factor in the mechanism through which the professional group identification of grassroots civil servants influences job burnout. When an individual's group identity is activated, there is a tendency for the individual to endorse the group's values through appropriate behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Coursey & Perry, 2011). Motivated by identification with the group, the individual is driven to adhere to the standards that most accurately represent the collective identity (Stets & Burke, 2000).

We constructed a model based on social identity theory which emphasizes the logic that individuals define themselves and determine their behavior by their identity and knowledge of the group they belong to (Tajfel, 1979). Social identity theory has been used in psychology, organizational behavior and other fields to explain the relationship between various identifications and burnout (Avanzi et al., 2018; Correia & Almeida, 2020). Although useful, social identity theory has not received ample attention guiding the investigation into the formation mechanism of professional group identification in the public sector.

Multiple social identifications in organization and job burnout

Identification refers to an individual's perception of belonging to or unity with specific human groups or social categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theory

advances the idea of group identification, describing it as the process of aligning oneself with a group and its members by reflecting and internalizing the group's actions, beliefs, standards, and goals (Stets & Burke, 2000; VandenBos, 2007). People often possess multiple identities, exhibiting various levels of identification based on the goals of different groups (Riordan & Weatherly, 1999). Organizational researchers classify employee identification according to the scope of the groups they belong to.

Team identification, also referred to as workgroup identification, typically involves an individual's connection with a specific workgroup (Riordan & Weatherly, 1999). In contrast, organizational identification pertains to the sense of belonging to the larger group. While organizations may encompass teams, they exhibit a more structured and hierarchical nature, distinct from individual team identities (Lammers et al., 2013). Professional identification is generally understood as the perception individuals hold regarding their professional role (Schott et al., 2018), emphasizing identification dedication, and the love for the work itself (Loi et al., 2004; M.-H. Lu et al., 2022). Existing research on groups of professionals, including doctors, nurses, and teachers, has consistently demonstrated that team identification, organizational identification, and professional identification all exert significant positive effects on mitigating job burnout (Avanzi et al., 2018; Correia & Almeida, 2020; Frenzel et al., 2022; M.-H. Lu et al., 2022; Sangal et al., 2021).

However, is there another form of identification that can alleviate job burnout? Vough (2012) identified a unique form of group identification where employees emphasize similarity with the values, mission, identity, or culture of the target group, focusing on how well they fit with the professional group's ideal archetype. To differentiate from the broader notion of professional identification, we employ a more precise term, professional group identification, to describe the independent variable. The concept of professional group identification can be clarified by comparing it with other concepts. Unlike professional identification, which reflects a personal connection to the profession itself, professional group identification is defined by the relationship between individuals and their group. It remains a form of group identification but is distinguished by having clear professional boundaries. Unlike team identification, which pertains to a specific team, professional group identification encompasses the entire professional group. In contrast to organizational identification, this concept does not emphasize the group's internal structure or hierarchy. Table 1 provides a detailed comparison of these differences. However, how professional group identification is related to job burnout among civil servants has still not gained much attention. In addition, systematic differences exist between different forms of identification. For instance, team identification tends to correlate more strongly with group satisfaction and climate than organizational identification does (Vough, 2012). This suggests that the relationship between professional group identification and job

Table 1. The differences between concepts.

Concept	Characteristic
Professional group identification	Emphasis on groups with professional boundaries rather than attributes; Not concerned with hierarchy and structure; Focus on individual-group relationships
Team (workgroup) identification	For a smaller group in an organization
Organizational identification	Groups have a clear hierarchy and structure
Group identification	More macro and abstract
Professional identification	Emphasis on professional recognition

Note. Based on previous research.

burnout may differ from that of other types of identification, warranting further investigation.

Therefore, this study concentrates on the impact of professional group identification on job burnout. In the following section, we will illustrate why we address the job burnout of Chinese grassroots civil servants from the perspective of professional group identification.

The context of investigating Chinese grassroots civil servants' professional group identification

It is of significance to investigate the relationship between professional group identification and job burnout in particular with grassroots civil servants in China. First, the entry barriers for civil servants in China are notably high. Unlike that there are various paths to civil service in European and American countries (e.g., the U.S., Cheng, 2014), the only way to become a civil servant in China nowadays is by passing the highly competitive and challenging national civil servant exam (Mériadé & Qiang, 2015). Second, inter-group mobility among civil servants is extremely limited. In contrast to Western nations that emphasize the "political neutrality" of civil servants (e.g., the Netherlands, Van der Wal and Yang, 2015), China maintains strict Party control over its civil servants (Bai & Liu, 2020). Although civil servants may rotate across various posts, working groups, or departments, they are rarely allowed to transfer into other professions. Furthermore, resignation requires approval through multiple organizational levels. Through unified Party ideology, Confucian ethical values, and a life-long tenure, Chinese civil servants foster loyalty not just to a single workgroup, organization, or institution, but to the entire professional group (Van der Wal & Yang, 2015). These features underscore the civil servant group's uniqueness and stability, with clear group boundaries.

Additionally, grassroots civil servants make up this workforce's majority. They endure more difficult working conditions, lower pay, higher task demands, greater pressure to perform and advance, and a higher likelihood of job burnout (P. Wang & Li, 2012). For instance, an urban management officer at the grassroots level, on average, is responsible for over 300 tasks within their duties (Zang,

2017). Addressing the burnout issue among grassroots civil servants is a pressing need. Given the distinct nature of the civil servant group, a strong sense of identification with the broader professional group may be crucial in mitigating job burnout for grassroots civil servants.

Professional group identification and job burnout

According to social identity theory, when an individual's group identification strengthens, he or she becomes more receptive to adopting the values, norms, goals, and other elements linked with the group identity (Benjamin et al., 2010). This shift in focus from the individual to the group occurs as individuals perceive group norms and meaning. Believing that group identity forms the core of their self-concept and fostering a strong emotional connection with the group profoundly influences their psychology and behavior.

Identifying with a group satisfies the fundamental need for belonging, and the lack of belonging is a key predictor of exhaustion (Junker et al., 2022). Stronger professional group identification encourages individuals to more closely follow the group's norms, values, and goals, fostering a greater sense of mission and responsibility, which leads to lower levels of work-related cynicism (Stewart & Garcia-Prieto, 2008). Additionally, group identification provides a source of self-affirmation. People see their group as a unified "we," strengthening their sense of efficacy by sharing the group's values, identity, and achievements. Those with stronger group identification are more likely to perceive alignment between their personal values and those of the group. They credit their successes to the group and externalize negative outcomes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Junker et al., 2022). We can infer that when fellow civil servants are recognized for their contributions, or when public perception of civil servants is favorable, grassroots civil servants with high professional group identification may experience a greater sense of personal accomplishment. Given that exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment are core components of burnout, strong professional group identification may help alleviate burnout. This is consistent with prior research, which finds that

individuals with stronger group identification report lower levels of burnout (Steffens et al., 2017; Szabó & Jagodics, 2024). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Grassroots civil servants' professional group identification has a negative effect on job burnout.

The mediating effect of GRD

Relative deprivation denotes an individual's sense of being at a disadvantage upon comparing themselves with a reference subject, involving unmet desires, subjective injustice, and even resentment (Smith et al., 2012). The specific form arising from external group comparisons is termed group relative deprivation (GRD).

Professional group identification among grassroots civil servants influences GRD. According to social identity theory, individuals with strong group identification are more likely to make personal sacrifices for the group's benefit, remain loyal, and feel a deeper sense of belonging to the group (Raffield et al., 2016). One potential outcome of this is a heightened commitment to the group and a belief that their group is superior to others (Swann et al., 2009). Relative deprivation refers to the feeling of disadvantage that arises from comparing one's group to others. However, if individuals maintain a sense of group superiority, feelings of relative deprivation are likely to decrease. Empirical studies have shown that individuals with high group identification tend to hold a positive view of their group, resulting in positive emotional experiences that buffer against perceptions of injustice and disadvantage, thereby reducing the tendency to feel relative deprivation (Tropp & Wright, 1999; Zagefka et al., 2013). Based on this, we can infer that grassroots civil servants with strong professional group identification, despite their lower status within the civil service system, may view themselves as having higher social status, reputation, and other advantages compared to employees in other occupational groups, reducing their likelihood of experiencing group relative deprivation.

GRD among grassroots civil servants may influence their job burnout. Sablonnière et al. (2012) showed that as GRD increased, individuals developed dissatisfaction with their current group conditions. Over time, this dissatisfaction manifested as negative personal reactions, such as reduced work motivation, psychological distress and physical or emotional exhaustion (burnout). Moreover, feelings of unfairness—a key aspect of relative deprivation—are linked to lower job satisfaction and subjective well-being (Erdogan et al., 2018; Schmitt et al., 2010). Employees have to expend more individual resources to cope with these factors, leading to more exhaustion and fatigue (Bottiani et al., 2019; Szabó & Jagodics, 2024). In summary, we hypothesize:

H2: GRD serves as a mediating factor in the association between professional group identification and job burnout.

H2a: Professional group identification has a negative effect on GRD.

H2b: GRD has a positive effect on job burnout.

The mediating effect of PSM

Public service motivation (PSM) denotes the psychological inclination of individuals to respond primarily or entirely to motivations originating from public systems and organizations (Perry & Wise, 1990). This concept is often employed to elucidate civil servants' preference for the public sector and their eagerness to engage in public affairs. It is generally acknowledged that grassroots civil servants with higher PSM demonstrate greater willingness to participate in public sector activities (e.g. Cooke et al., 2019; De Simone et al., 2016; Mussagulova, 2021).

Social identity theory suggests that individuals with strong group identification undergo a depersonalization process, viewing themselves as prototypes of the group. This process fosters a powerful motivation toward obedience to group directives (Swann et al., 2009). To maintain group homogeneity, individuals are more inclined to act according to the norms and values associated with their group identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Evidence shows that employees with higher identification with their professional group tend to work harder and perform better (Szabó & Jagodics, 2024). Since the civil servant group inherently emphasizes public service, grassroots civil servants may see themselves as ideal archetype of this spirit, leading to greater self-discipline and adherence to civil servant standards. Previous research also supports the idea that PSM is shaped by a normative environment (institutions, groups), including accepted rules and customs (Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenabeele, 2007). To some extent, professional group identification bears similarities to the individual-level concept outlined by Perry and Vandenabeele (2008) in their model of institutional, identity, and public service behavior logic (Coursey & Perry, 2011). Therefore, it can be inferred that the more strongly grassroots civil servants identify with their professional group, the higher their PSM will be.

PSM may significantly negatively correlate with job burnout. First of all, high PSM among grassroots civil servants leads to increased job satisfaction (Quratulain & Khan, 2015). This suggests that those with high PSM are more likely to experience positive emotions (such as job satisfaction) at work (Homberg et al., 2015). Positive experiences will save employees a lot of personal resources to devote to more work stress, which aligns with the previous study regarding PSM as a resource to reduce burnout (Bakker, 2015). Additionally, grassroots civil servants with robust PSM exhibit greater efficiency in their public service roles, increasing the likelihood of positive feedback and mitigating the depletion of psychological resources (T. Kim et al., 2015). They are willing to spend more time and energy to manage their bad emotions and stress to avoid burnout

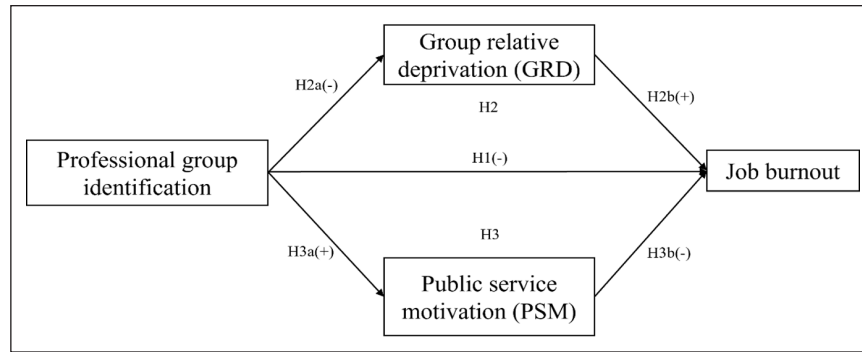


Figure 1. The research model.

(Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, a stronger PSM among grassroots civil servants results in increased dedication to public service activities, facilitating a sense of accomplishment in serving society and realizing public interests (J. Kim, 2018). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: PSM serves as a mediating factor in the association between professional group identification and job burnout.

H3a: Professional group identification has a positive effect on PSM.

H3b: PSM has a negative effect on job burnout.

The model to be investigated in this study is shown in Figure 1.

Method

We conducted two studies to examine our hypotheses. Study 1 is an experimental study that controls for external variables and tests the direct causal relationship between professional group identification and job burnout, providing a basis for further exploration of underlying mechanisms (James et al., 2017). If the full model is examined directly, the direct relationship between the independent variables may be questioned. To the best of our knowledge, few existing studies have used experimental methods to explore the causal link between group identification and burnout specifically with civil servants. Building on the findings of Study 1, we were confident enough to conduct Study 2 to further examine how professional group identification influences job burnout. In Study 2, we employed a questionnaire survey to delve into the specific mechanism by which professional group identification influences job burnout through GRD and PSM.

Study 1

Design and procedure

We adopted a single-factor between-group design, featuring three experimental conditions: high-level professional

group identification, low-level professional group identification, and a control condition. The questionnaire utilized in the experiment was generated using Credamo, a survey and experiment platform like Amazons Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics. The questionnaires were delivered to grassroots civil servants through targeted subject pool services on the platform. The data collected through this platform adheres to the rigorous standards set by leading international academic journals (visit www.credamo.world for more information, e.g. C. Chen et al., 2023).

The distribution of questionnaires on the platform transforms the experiment into a double-blind setup, minimizing researchers' interference with participants, and enhancing internal validity. Screening questions for grassroots civil servants are integrated into the questionnaire to maintain sample quality, with participants failing the screening questions being excluded. During the questionnaire completion process, the platform automatically and randomly allocates participants to different experimental conditions, mitigating random assignment errors. To maximize attention, the questionnaire is exclusively designed for completion through a computer browser.

The experimental procedure is as follows (see Figure 2): once participants agreed to take part in and officially commenced the questionnaire, they first provided information on their gender and age. Following this, participants were randomly allocated to one of three experimental groups and instructed to view the corresponding manipulation materials. Subsequently, participants sequentially underwent a comprehension check (to assess careful reading of materials), a manipulation check (measuring professional group identification), and an assessment of job burnout. Finally, demographic details such as education, administrative level, and length of service were reported. A debriefing was presented at the end of the questionnaire, clarifying to participants that the provided reading materials were entirely fictional.

Manipulation

The reading materials for experimental manipulation were adapted from Abner et al.'s (2020), where the civil servants' professional group identification was manipulated by

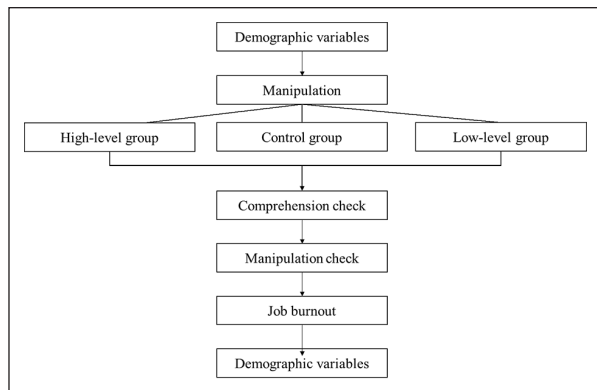


Figure 2. The experimental procedure.

presenting them with the results of a professional social survey on the impression of grassroots civil servants (G. Wang & Wei, 2021). This design of manipulation is grounded in the understanding that external evaluations significantly impact an individual's self-worth, as well as emotions and attitudes in intergroup interaction (Song et al., 2022). Positive public evaluations encourage grassroots civil servants to strengthen their professional group identification, whereas negative public evaluations create a psychological gap among them, triggering identity threats (G. Wang & Wei, 2021). The details of the materials are shown in Supplemental Appendix.

Sample

A total of 151 participants from 92 cities across 28 provinces in China. Their ages ranged from 19 to 54 years ($M=29.46$, $SD=6.26$). Tenure varied from 1 to 27 years ($M=6.00$, $SD=5.66$). For the gender distribution, there were 65 males and 86 females. For administrative levels, the sample comprised 9 with no administrative rank, 98 staff members, 23 deputy section chiefs, 17 section chiefs, 3 deputy division directors, and 1 division directors. For educational background, the sample consisted of 103 with a bachelor's degree, 47 with a master's degree, and 1 with a doctorate. Regarding monthly income, 2 reported as less than 2,000 yuan, 71 between 2,001 and 5,000 yuan, 63 between 5,001 and 10,000 yuan, and 15 more than 10,001 yuan. The sample size for the high-level, low-level, and control groups was 46, 48, and 57, respectively. The results of one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences among the three groups for all the demographic characteristics. This indicates successful randomization across groups and enhances our confidence that any differences found in the dependent variables can be attributed to the experimental treatment. See Table 2 for more details.

Measure

We used scales that have been widely applied to many research. See the Supplemental Appendix for all scales.

Job burnout. The scale was revised to align with China's national conditions (Li & Shi, 2003), including 15 items (1 = never or rarely, and 7 = every day). Cronbach's α in this study was .746.

Manipulation check. We measured professional group identification as the manipulation check. Following Zhang et al.'s (2009), we adapted the scale developed by Doosje et al. (1995) to assess professional group identification. The scale has four items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's α in this study was .784.

Comprehension check. For each group, participants received two questions. The first question, titled "In the research results you just saw, how do Chinese people evaluate grassroots civil servants?" required participants to select 1 (for the highest positive evaluation), 2 (for the highest negative evaluation), or 3 (the research did not mention it). For the high-level, low-level, and control groups, the correct answer should be 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

For the high/low-level group, the second question was titled "In the research results you just saw, which of the following words was not included in the evaluation of grassroots civil servants by the people around them that was heard by more than 60% of the respondents according to the research results you just saw?" For the high-level group, four options were presented: "diligent," "talented," "responsible," and "of high morality" (correct answer). For the low-level group, the four options were "lazy," "incompetent," "irresponsible," and "of low morality" (correct answer). For the control group, the second question was titled "In the research results you just saw, which of the following options is not considered in the process of achieving carbon neutrality?" The four options were "prioritizing those greenhouse gases with high potential," "considering both carbon reduction and carbon offsets," "identifying options for carbon offsets," and "reducing annual vehicle production" (correct answer). Data correct in both questions were included in the final analysis.

Control variables. Study 1 collected gender, age, tenure, education, administrative level, and personal monthly income.

Result

Manipulation check

We employed one-way ANOVA with professional group identification as the dependent variable and the experimental group as the independent variable. Levene's homogeneity of variance test revealed non-homogeneous variance ($p < .001$). Employing the Welch method for a robustness test of mean equality, results indicated significant differences in professional group identification scores among the three groups, Welch $F(2, 94.207) = 13.623$, $p < .001$. The Games-Howell method was utilized for post-hoc multiple

Table 2. Details of demographic variables and group randomization check in Study 1.

Variables	High identification	Low identification	Control	p_{ANOVA}
Demographic	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	
Gender				.474
Female	27 (58.7)	29 (49.1)	30 (37.5)	
Male	19 (41.3)	28 (50.9)	18 (62.5)	
Education				.824
Bachelor	24 (52.2)	38 (66.7)	34 (70.8)	
Master	18 (39.1)	18 (31.6)	14 (29.2)	
Doctor	4 (8.7)	1 (1.8)		
Income				.517
Below 2,000 CNY			2 (4.2)	
2,001–5,000 CNY	24 (52.2)	23 (40.4)	24 (50.0)	
5,001–10,000 CNY	18 (39.1)	29 (50.9)	16 (33.3)	
Above 10,001 CNY	4 (8.7)	5 (8.8)	6 (12.5)	
Job level				.052
No administrative rank	4 (8.7)	2 (3.5)	3 (6.3)	
Staff members	32 (69.6)	33 (57.9)	33 (68.8)	
Deputy section chief	7 (15.2)	10 (17.5)	6 (12.5)	
Section chief	3 (6.5)	10 (17.5)	4 (8.3)	
Deputy division director		1 (1.8)	2 (4.2)	
Division director		1 (1.8)		
	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	.188
Age	28 (4.5)	30 (7.0)	29 (6.6)	
	21	19	21	
	41	48	54	
Tenure	5 (4.6)	7 (6.8)	5.5 (5.0)	.205
	1	1	1	
	22	27	25	

Note. $N=439$.

comparisons. It was observed that the average score of the high-level group ($M=5.30$, $SD=0.78$) was significantly higher than that of the low-level group ($M=4.64$, $SD=0.90$), $p < .001$, with a 95% confidence interval (CI) of [0.370, 0.968]. This indicates successful manipulation of professional group identification.

The main effect of professional group identification on job burnout

We utilized one-way ANOVA with job burnout as the dependent variable and the experimental group as the independent variable. Levine's homogeneity of variance test results indicated homogeneity of variance ($p = .442$). Variance analysis revealed significant differences in job burnout among the high-level group, the low-level group, and the control group, $F(2, 148) = 4.029$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.052$.

LSD post-hoc comparative analysis results demonstrated that job burnout in the high-level group ($M=2.64$, $SD=0.76$) was significantly lower than that in the low-level group ($M=3.04$, $SD=0.89$, $p < .05$) and the control group ($M=3.10$, $SD=0.92$, $p < .01$), with 95% CIs of [-0.752, -0.047] and [-0.796, -0.119], respectively. Corresponding

Cohen's d s were 0.485 and 0.780. There was no significant difference in job burnout between the low-level group and the control group ($p = .735$, 95% CI [-0.392, 0.277]). As illustrated in Figure 3, this result supports H1, indicating that individuals with a high professional group identification experience lower job burnout.

To further examine the impact of professional group identification on job burnout while controlling for other variables, we employed the experimental group (with the low-level group, control group, and high-level group coded as 1, 2, and 3, respectively) as the independent variable and job burnout as the dependent variable, and performed multiple linear regression analysis. Results revealed that higher professional group identification among civil servants was significant associated with a lower perceived level of job burnout, $B = -0.160$, $p < .05$. Thus, H1 was further supported.

Study 2

Data and sample

Using the same platform and collection methods as Study 1, we recruited a total of 461 grassroots civil servants from

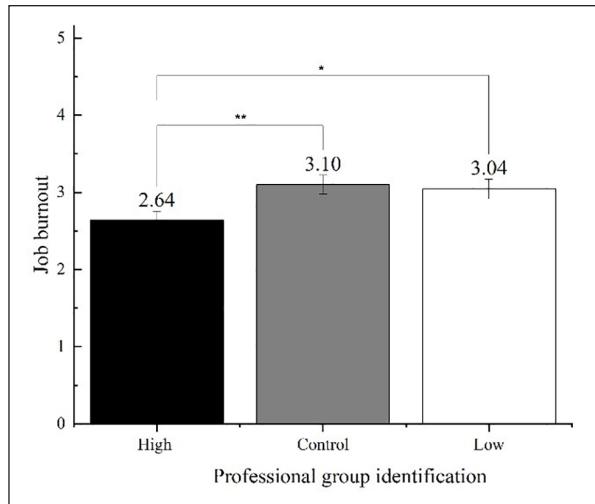


Figure 3. Intergroup differences in job burnout among grassroots civil servants.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

122 cities across 28 provinces. A final sample of 439 participants was retained after excluding invalid data according to the same rule as Study 1. Participants aged from 21 to 55 years ($M = 29.69$, $SD = 5.33$), and their tenure spanned from 1 to 32 years ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 5.31$). Table 3 illustrates the sample information of this study.

Measure

Job burnout. The scale employed in Study 1 was used. Cronbach's α in Study 2 was .912.

Professional group identification. The scale employed in Study 1 was used. Cronbach's α in Study 2 was .870.

GRD. The two items from Tropp and Wright (1999) scale measuring GRD were employed (1 = much worse, 7 = much better). For ease of interpreting data analysis results, the scale was reverse-scored. Cronbach's α was .885.

PSM. The PSM scale developed by S. Kim et al. (2013) was adopted, with a total of 16 items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's α was .927.

Control variable. Age, gender, personal monthly income, education, tenure, and administrative level were measured and included in the analysis as control variables.

Result

Validity and common method bias

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 24.0 was employed to assess the construct validity of the questionnaire. Four scales, representing professional group identification, GRD, PSM, and job burnout, were treated as four distinct

Table 3. Sample characteristics in Study 2.

Demographic variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	211	48.06
Female	228	51.94
Education		
Bachelor's degree or below	350	79.73
Master	84	19.13
Doctor	5	1.14
Administrative		
None	27	6.15
Staff member	309	70.39
Deputy section chief	76	17.31
Section chief	21	4.78
Deputy division director	4	0.91
Division director	2	0.46
Personal monthly income		
2,000 yuan or less	2	0.46
2,001–5,000 yuan	267	60.82
5,001–10,000 yuan	140	31.89
10,000 yuan or above	30	6.83

Note. $N = 439$.

Table 4. The result of CFA.

Model	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	CFI	GFI
Four-factor	1.469	0.033	0.981	0.921
Three-factor	3.458	0.075	0.889	0.771
Two-factor	3.919	0.082	0.867	0.752
One-factor	8.201	0.128	0.634	0.474
ULMC	1.103	0.015	0.996	0.945

Note. $N = 439$. Three-factor model was that professional group identification and PSM were incorporated into one factor; the Two-factor model was that professional group identification, PSM, and GRD were incorporated into one factor.

factors. As shown in Table 4, the four-factor CFA model exhibits the most favorable fit indices. In this model, the values of CMIN/DF, RMSEA, CFI, and GFI all meet the criteria for optimal fit, suggesting robust construct validity for the questionnaire in this study. The average variance extracted (AVE) from the four-factor CFA model was .470.

The unmeasured latent method construct (ULMC) technique was employed to examine common method bias (Williams & McGonagle, 2016). We added a latent method construct to the original four-factor model. Upon comparing the five-factor model with the original four-factor model, it was evident that the change in CFI and GFI did not surpass .05, and the common method bias was not serious (see Zhao et al., 2022).

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 5 showed the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient of the core variables in this study. Results indicated the following: (1) professional group identification was

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results of core variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4
Professional group identification	—			
GRD	-.667***	—		
PSM	.432***	-.269***	—	
Job burnout	-.582***	.592***	-.341***	—
M	4.933	3.354	4.049	3.473
SD	1.250	1.358	.537	1.110

Note. $N=439$.

*** $p < .001$.

significantly negatively correlated with job burnout ($r = -.582, p < .001$); (2) professional group identification was significantly negatively correlated with GRD ($r = -.667, p < .001$); (3) professional group identification was significantly positively correlated with PSM ($r = .432, p < .001$); (4) GRD was significantly positively correlated with job burnout ($r = .592, p < .001$); (5) PSM was significantly negatively correlated with job burnout ($r = -.341, p < .001$). H1, H2a, H2b, H3a, and H3b were preliminarily supported.

The main effect of professional group identification on job burnout

The process plug-in in SPSS 24.0 (Model 4) was employed to investigate the main and mediating effects in this study (Hayes, 2017). As shown in Model 1 of Table 6,

professional group identification exhibits a significantly negative association with job burnout ($B = -0.501, p < .001$). This suggests that a higher professional group identification among grassroots civil servants corresponds to lower job burnout, thus supporting H1.

Mediating effects of GRD and PSM

Results indicated that (1) professional group identification was significantly negatively associated with GRD ($B = -0.681, p < .001$, see Model 2 in Table 5), supporting H2a; (2) Professional group identification was significantly positively associated with PSM ($B = 0.191, p < .001$, see Model 3 in Table 5), supporting H3a; (3) GRD was significantly positively associated with job burnout ($B = 0.289, p < .001$), supporting H2b. PSM was significantly negatively associated with job burnout ($B = -0.247, p < .01$), supporting H3b. The negative predictive effect of professional group identification on job burnout remained significant ($B = -0.257, p < .001$, see Model 4 in Table 6).

With repeated sampling for 5,000 times by the Bootstrap method, the direct effect of professional group identification on job burnout ($B = -0.257$) and the indirect effects of GRD ($B = -0.197$) and PSM ($B = -0.047$) accounted for 51.2%, 39.3%, and 9.4% of the total effect, respectively. Thus, H2 and H3 were both supported. We did a further post hoc analysis. By comparing the indirect effects of the two mediators (see Table 7), after subtracting the path with PSM as the mediating variable from the path with GRD, the 95%CI did not include 0, indicating that the indirect effect of GRD was significantly higher than that of PSM.

Table 6. Results of main effect and mediating effect.

	Job burnout	GRD	PSM	Job burnout
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Gender	-0.027 (0.089)	0.076 (0.095)	0.173** (0.047)	-0.006 (0.085)
Age	-0.013 (0.021)	-0.041 (0.023)	-0.011 (0.011)	-0.004 (0.020)
Tenure	-0.001 (0.022)	0.027 (0.023)	0.017 (0.012)	-0.003 (0.020)
Administrative level	0.091 (0.068)	0.121 (0.073)	-0.008 (0.037)	0.054 (0.065)
Education	-0.057 (0.105)	-0.019 (0.113)	0.072 (0.056)	-0.034 (0.099)
Personnel monthly income	-0.187* (0.074)	-0.468*** (0.080)	-0.031 (0.040)	-0.060 (0.073)
Professional group identification	-0.501*** (0.035)	-0.681*** (0.038)	0.191*** (0.020)	-0.257*** (0.047)
GRD				0.289*** (0.042)
PSM				-0.247** (0.085)
F	33.887***	62.230***	17.178***	35.646***
R	.596	.709	.467	.654
R ²	.355	.503	.218	.428

Note. $N=439$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Bootstrap analysis of mediating effects.

Path	B (SE)	Proportion	95%CI [lower limit, upper limit]
Professional group identification → job burnout			
Total effect	-0.501 (0.035)	100%	[0.570, -0.432]
Direct effect	-0.257 (0.047)	51.2%	[-0.350, -0.165]
Professional group identification → GRD → Job burnout			
Indirect effect 1	-0.197 (0.040)	39.3%	[-0.269, -0.133]
Professional group identification → PSM → Job burnout			
Indirect effect 2	-0.047 (0.019)	9.4%	[-0.085, -0.013]
The sum of indirect effects: Indirect effect 1 + indirect effect 2	-0.244 (0.040)	48.7%	[-0.323, -0.165]
Comparison of indirect effect: Indirect effect 1 - indirect effect 2	-0.149 (0.038)	—	[-0.228, -0.079]

Note. $N=439$.

Discussion and conclusion

Research results and interpretation

Based on the findings from Study 1 and Study 2, high professional group identification in Chinese grassroots civil servants corresponded to low job burnout. Additionally, it was observed that high professional group identification was associated with low GRD and high PSM, leading to low job burnout. However, we found the mediating effect of GRD was notably more pronounced than that of PSM. This suggests that the alleviating impact of professional group identification on job burnout, achieved by mitigating GRD, surpassed its impact through bolstering PSM.

GRD is naturally characterized by the feeling that “inequality is not scarcity” (Smith et al., 2012), and emerges as a significant contributor to job burnout, potentially arising from a perceived lack of fairness in resource allocation (Li & Shi, 2003). Grassroots civil servants often face real-life inequalities, challenging the common perception that they enjoy a stable income and easy work. Moreover, this phenomenon may be attributed to “loss aversion,” a cognitive bias wherein people find losses more burdensome than equivalent gains. If PSM is viewed as a psychological resource akin to “gains” for alleviating job burnout (Shim et al., 2017), then GRD probably functions as a psychological resource akin to “loss” that exacerbates job burnout. In essence, professional group identification’s role in alleviating job burnout revolves around mitigating the “loss aversion” triggered by GRD. High group identification enables individuals to adopt incentive strategies, downplaying the pain caused by deprivation and enhancing their ability to overcome “loss aversion.” As we mentioned above, with heightened professional group identification, grass-roots civil servants may motivate themselves to overlook group shortcomings, thereby alleviating the sense of relative deprivation and mitigating job burnout.

Theoretical and practical insights

Addressing job burnout among civil servants has been a persistent challenge in public sector human resource

management. This study contributes novel insights by proposing solutions from the perspective of professional group identification. Previous studies have mostly discussed the relationship between team identification, organizational identification, professional identification, and job burnout. However, Lammers et al. (2013) highlighted that employees’ sense of belonging is primarily derived from the whole professional group rather than other factors. According to Vough’s (2012) exploratory research, a significant negative correlation between professional group identification and depersonalization (a key aspect of job burnout) was revealed. Our findings indicate a direct mitigating effect of professional group identification on overall job burnout, providing additional supporting evidence to prior research.

Furthermore, we integrated professional group identification, GRD, PSM, and job burnout among grassroots civil servants into a theoretical framework. It establishes both positive and negative explanatory pathways for how professional group identification affects job burnout. The study suggests that the mitigating effect of professional group identification on job burnout is rooted in empowering employees with the ability to cope with adverse factors, rather than encouraging them to seek psychological resources through alternative approaches. Consequently, we have provided a more nuanced understanding of the mechanism through which professional group identification alleviates job burnout.

Another contribution of this research lies in its methodology. Many empirical studies on job burnout still rely on correlational research designs, which may lack internal validity and the ability to establish causal relationships (e.g. M.-H. Lu et al., 2022). In contrast, this study employs a combination of experimental and survey methods, offering high internal validity while investigating the causal mechanism between professional group identification and job burnout. Moreover, the use of experimental methods in job burnout research provides public sector managers with refined intervention recommendations, as manipulating professional group identity itself can be a targeted management measure.

Amid the growing intricacies of public affairs, the challenges faced by grassroots civil servants are escalating. The work pressure on grassroots civil servants is, to a certain extent, continuously increasing. In circumstances where objective work pressure cannot be alleviated, boosting professional group identification among grassroots civil servants emerges as a potentially effective strategy for reducing their job burnout.

Addressing how to enhance the professional group identification of grassroots civil servants is a significant consideration. Previous research has put forward measures like group culture construction to boost civil servants' professional group identification (e.g. Lammers et al., 2013). However, such measures may demand substantial financial, time, and human resource investments, and in certain grassroots public sectors, available resources might be inadequate for extensive and long-term interventions. We suggested that when grassroots civil servants encounter more positive evaluations from the public, their professional group identification notably increases, accompanied by a significant decrease in job burnout. This implies that we presented grassroots public sectors with a feasible and cost-effective intervention measure to achieve meaningful outcomes with limited resources, actively contributing to alleviating grassroots civil servants' job burnout.

Specifically, in day-to-day operations, creating "casual" moments and occasionally exposing grassroots civil servants to positive public evaluations can be an effective strategy. This approach allows grassroots civil servants to genuinely recognize that their efforts contribute positively to service recipients, fostering a sense of meaningfulness. In essence, by demonstrating that their hard work has a positive impact on others (Grant, 2012), external positive evaluations mitigate GRD. This, in turn, generates a psychological sense of compensation among grassroots civil servants, ultimately lowering job burnout.

Research limitations and future directions

This research may have some limitations. Firstly, in terms of research methods, while Study 1 utilized a survey experiment with relatively high internal validity, it might be challenging to eliminate interference related to participants' situations while filling out the questionnaire. Study 2 employed a questionnaire survey, which carried the risk of common method bias, such as social desirability bias in measuring PSM and professional group identification. However, we took several steps to minimize and assess these risks, including procedural controls (e.g. double-blind design) and statistical controls (e.g. ULMC). These treatments helped reduce the influence of potential biases on the results. Future research could consider conducting lab experiments with the highest internal validity, rigorously controlling for additional interfering variables.

Secondly, from a long-term perspective, job burnout among grassroots civil servants may change with variations in organizational factors such as position, income, work environment, leadership style, and management practices. The cross-sectional design cannot examine the relationships between variables over time. Future research could conduct longitudinal investigations to address this issue.

Additionally, as explained by Ashforth et al. (2008), various factors may weaken the relationship between identification and behavior. This study did not focus on the factors influencing the relationship between professional group identification and job burnout. Future research could expand in this direction.

Finally, factors contributing to job burnout are complex and varied. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative designs, to further explore the mechanisms behind the emergence of job burnout among grassroots civil servants and identify more comprehensive coping strategies.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Yan Wang for her helpful comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant/Award Number: 72474237), the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, Sun Yat-sen University (Grant/Award Number: 24wkqb05), and the key program of National Social Science Foundation of China (Grant/Award Number: 23AZZ001).

Ethics approval statement

We obtained ethics approval for this study from Hunan University.

Patient consent statement

Before conducting experiments or surveys, we obtained the permission of all participants.

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Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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