

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

# Communication in Pharmacy Higher Education to Improve Work-life and Mitigate Burnout

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Submitted February 24, 2021; accepted June 18, 2021; published February 2022

**Objective.** To identify the content, style, timing, tone, and initiation of communication that best connotes “reassurance of worth” from peers and supervisors in pharmacy academia.

**Methods.** This study employed semi-structured interviews to acquire in-depth information from pharmacy faculty through a purposive sampling process. Academicians who had published in the area of work-life and/or were deemed likely to make substantial contributions to the interview were asked to participate. Participants represented a cross section of pharmacy faculty in terms of discipline, institution, and demographic characteristics. An interview guide was constructed based on motivating language theory and provisions of social relationships theory. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Themes were gleaned using open coding, then audited and checked.

**Results.** Data saturation occurred after eight interviews. Two primary themes emerged: guidance, particularly related to professional development and tenure; and reassurance of worth through invited participation, praise, and/or rewards. Interviewees highlighted the importance of empathetic yet practical language among peers, and supervisor-initiated, meaning-making language rather than generic platitudes.

**Conclusion.** Empathetic, personal language that provides guidance and reassurance of worth can enhance pharmacy faculty contributions and mitigate burnout. Invitations to collaborate are seen by faculty as collegial and engaging. This study demonstrated the usefulness of motivating language theory and social provisions in guiding communications among pharmacy academicians.

**Keywords:** burnout, communication, institutional support, motivating language theory, pharmacy education

## INTRODUCTION

Quality of work life is an important topic in academic pharmacy, as evidenced by a growing repository of literature describing increasingly challenging faculty expectations and work environments.<sup>1-3</sup> Work environment issues are especially salient considering the Academy’s emphasis on faculty recruitment, well-being, and retention.<sup>4-6</sup> An organization’s culture and citizenship behaviors impact the well-being and success of faculty constituents.<sup>7,8</sup>

The World Health Organization redefined burnout as referring “specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”<sup>9,10</sup> Maslach and colleagues state that “you have to have been on fire to burn out,”<sup>11</sup>

suggesting idealistic workers are the most likely to experience burnout.<sup>11</sup> The implication is that dedicated people often commit too much in support of their ideals, which leads to exhaustion, depersonalization, and the feeling of a lack of personal achievement when their sacrifice is insufficient to achieve their goals.

Neglecting work-life quality and well-being can have deleterious effects, including burnout.<sup>12</sup> A study of US pharmacy practice faculty reported high levels of burnout, primarily due to emotional exhaustion.<sup>13</sup> Balancing myriad roles, generally required of practice faculty, can result in an untenable work environment.<sup>14</sup> Prescott suggested that pharmacy practice faculty are prone to burnout due to a mismatch in their training with key academic performance metrics.<sup>15</sup> Feelings of frustration, worthlessness, and lack of purpose can lead to group anomie, especially in weak organizational cultures and/or “sour climates.”<sup>16</sup>

Supportive feedback is a powerful deterrent to burnout.<sup>17</sup> A supportive culture is created by the entire

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organization, not just its leaders.<sup>18</sup> A supportive culture in academia is shaped by administrators, faculty, and staff, and permeates multiple facets of the organization, including equitable reward, performance orientation, stability, and collegiality.<sup>8</sup>

The buffering hypothesis<sup>19,20</sup> asserts that “social support provides protection against the stressors that produce psychological or physiological disorder or disease or reduce job performance.”<sup>21</sup> Key sources of social support include coworkers, leaders, and the organization itself.<sup>18</sup> According to the cross-domain buffering hypothesis of social support, support from one domain can be particularly effective at reducing the negative consequences of a stressor from another domain.<sup>22</sup>

Weiss characterized six categories of relational provisions of support: attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, a sense of reliable alliance, and guidance.<sup>23</sup> Weiss noted the importance of the language used in the provision of support; that is, its tone, content, and context. Weiss’ research has been reaffirmed in other studies of collegiality in higher education<sup>24,25</sup> and was used to create the social provisions scale to measure perceptions of supportive behaviors.<sup>17</sup> Language used by peers and administrators in higher education, specifically word choice, could affect optimism, while language deficits resulted in a greater incidence of emotional exhaustion.<sup>26</sup>

The “spoken language of leadership” has long been identified as a critical influence in worker motivation and outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Motivating language theory<sup>28</sup> provides a comprehensive model for understanding how language impacts workers. The theory posits that strategic oral communication is an important motivational tool, having measurable effects on employee performance and job satisfaction. Mayfield, Mayfield, and Kopf developed a scale to measure the dimensions of motivating language, which include direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic language.<sup>27</sup> Direction-giving language is used to reduce uncertainty about tasks; empathetic language establishes relationships between superior and subordinate and reduces relational uncertainty; and meaning-making language reduces uncertainty about organizational policies and practices.<sup>29-31</sup>

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of appraising faculty of the value of their contributions in mitigating burnout and creating a positive workplace environment. However, little is known of the nature of the specific language that signifies value. Given the importance of communication and collegiality in higher education, this study aimed to identify the content, style, timing, tone, and initiation of communication that best connotes “reassurance of worth” from peers and

supervisors in pharmacy academia. This work is founded on social provisions<sup>23,32</sup> and motivating language theory.<sup>27,28</sup>

## **METHODS**

This study employed a cross-sectional, prospective design that used qualitative research to uncover the nuance that lay in the actions and communications among peers and supervisors. Semi-structured interviews<sup>33</sup> with pharmacy faculty were conducted to discern their lived experiences related to quality of work life, feelings of value to the organization, and burnout. Researchers developed a 14-question interview guide that allowed for follow-up and/or additional probing questions. Participants were allowed to veer from an original question when responding, but if the question remained unanswered, the interviewer would rephrase and ask again. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The Touro University California Institutional Review Board exempted this study from further review.

The researchers employed a purposeful sample of persons from varying types of institutions (eg, public vs private, teaching vs research), academic ranks, and disciplines, including basic, social/administrative, and practice faculty (who are often accountable to more than one supervisor and institution). The researchers called upon persons known to fit these broader criteria of heterogeneity and sought persons they knew were likely to contribute substantively and/or had published in an area related to academic work-life. Additionally, the researchers sought representation from persons varying by gender and racial/ethnic background and did not seek, a priori, persons likely to have either homogeneous or heterogeneous/outlier viewpoints. Participants were recruited through direct email. Each participant provided informed consent.

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview guide using language adapted from the Social Provisions Scale (SPS)<sup>10</sup> and from the Motivating Language Scale (MLS).<sup>27</sup> For example, to explore both the social provision of guidance and the dimension of direction-giving, we combined the intent of the SPS item, “There is no one I can turn to for guidance in times of stress” and the MLS item, “Gives me clear instructions about solving job-related problems” to ask, “What are some specific ways your colleagues, Chair, and Dean provide you with guidance or give you direction?” Refer to Table 1 for the semi-structured interview guide. One of the investigators for this study conducted the interviews via Zoom during the summer and fall of 2020.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide Used for a Study of Communication in Academic Pharmacy Settings

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How would you characterize the nature of communication between you and your peers? You and your Department Chair? You and your Dean?
What are some specific ways your colleagues express empathy or reassure you of your worth in regard to work challenges? Your Department Chair? Your Dean?
What are some specific ways your colleagues provide you with guidance or give you direction? Your Department Chair? Your Dean?
What are some specific ways your colleagues have reinforced your role in the organization or helped you feel your work was meaningful to the organization? Your Department Chair? Your Dean?
When communication occurs regarding your contributions to the organization, how is it typically initiated and by whom?
In what ways have your colleagues' actions spoken louder than their words? Your Department Chair's actions? Your Dean's actions?
To what extent do you feel people at your institution are competitive with you?
How does that competition make you feel?
How do your colleagues encourage or discourage competition? Your Department Chair? Your Dean?
What types of common work (eg, teaching, research, service) or social interests do you in engage in with others at your institution?
How do others communicate that your contributions to the common work are valued?
How does doing so (or not doing so) contribute to your feelings of worth?
How does communication at your institution contribute to or mitigate any emotional exhaustion and/or depersonalization you may feel?
How does communication at your institution contribute to or diminish your feelings of personal accomplishment?

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The final number of interviewees was determined through the process of saturation, which is a core principle in qualitative research. Saturation occurs when the researchers note a redundancy of responses or themes occurring over multiple interviews and the unlikelihood of gathering new data. To this end, the researchers conducted six initial interviews and concluded there could be additional data yet undisclosed, as participant 6 provided new information. Therefore, two additional interviews were conducted. Following those interviews, the researchers agreed that the additional data was redundant with responses from participants 1-5 and believed participant 6 to be an outlier. The data was then deemed likely to be reproducible in a similar study. Therefore, data collection was discontinued after eight interviews.

The interviews were transcribed by graduate assistants. Using an open-coding approach, the interviewer manually gleaned the data for responses to the research questions and for reoccurring themes. The interviewer then employed analytical coding to develop large overarching ideas.<sup>33</sup> The other researchers served as inquiry auditors.<sup>34</sup> Together, they created a revised coding table. Member checking<sup>34,35</sup> was conducted by emailing the coding table to participants to ensure that the essence of the participants' meanings was articulated accurately, no participants' reality was ignored, and there was agreement with the themes.

## RESULTS

Of the eight interviewees, four identified as male and four as female; six were White, two non-White; four taught at public research universities, three taught at private teaching institutions, and one was employed at a private research university. Four participants were from social pharmacy, two from clinical practice, and two from basic sciences.

The emergent themes were: guidance in the form of direction giving, particularly as it pertained to promotion/tenure and professional development (Table 2), and reassurance of worth, primarily in the form of inviting participation, praise, or rewards (Table 3).

In regard to guidance from supervisors, participants sought clarity on methods for goal achievement, particularly those associated with promotion and tenure. They described a need for advice on how to achieve success in the organization while maintaining work-life balance. The mode of communication by supervisors was described as important. While participants recognized the utility of mass communication, they obtained more satisfaction from direct, personal communication, and preferred that supervisors initiate guidance without a plea for help. Respondents also looked to peers for guidance, but generally in the form of informal, collegial, intimate discussion over lunch or during collaboration. Informal peer mentoring was described as a sincere

Table 2. Guidance Theme and Example Quotes From Semi-structured Interviews With Pharmacy Faculty Regarding Ways to Improve Worklife and Mitigate Burnout

Motivating Language Subtheme	Nature of Communication Example	Burnout	Participant	Example Quotes
Direction-Giving	Any	Mitigator	5	“I personally find it super helpful to be able to point to the [promotion and tenure document] and go ‘you need ... 20 papers and you need to have ... a grant worth \$250,000 or more, or you’re not getting tenure.’”
			7	“[My colleague said] ‘I’m going to send you my example ... feel free to choose my draft, feel free to edit and just put it in your application.’”
	In-person	Mitigator	1	“There’s so much signaling that you miss between written vs. spoken...so when you have in-person communication, I think that’s the ideal.”
			2	“I would rather have that opportunity to go into my boss’s office and talk for five minutes instead of an ... e-mail thread.”
	Informal	Mitigator	1	“a very open sort of atmosphere at the school where you can always reach out to somebody and engage in a conversation with them.”
Bi-Directional	Mitigator	3	“general chat sessions.”	
		3	“It is incredibly important ... everybody feel valued and feel heard.”	
		7	“Very nice bi-directional open communication.”	
Empathetic	Any	Mitigator	2	“You want your faculty members to come to you and ask for help. And you want them to like create that bridge. With empathy ... that bridge needs to be created.”
			8	“We’re all asked to come in only when we teach ... so I think I predict that there’ll be more burnout because there’s less socialization amongst our colleagues ... there’s a lack of opportunities to get that sort of casual guidance.”
	Any	Mitigator	5	“Trying to keep people aware of the purpose of things that stink ... what’s the reason why I have to do this terrible thing.”

interest in them as an individual and something beyond advice-giving and coaching.

Reassurance of worth was the second primary theme. Participants described instances where supervisors took a personal interest by asking how a particular endeavor fared. Forwarding achievements and significant news to higher ups (eg, deans, university officials) was also viewed as reassurance of worth. Conversely, participants provided accounts of how some supervisors resort to boilerplate language to compliment everyone for hard work or a job well done. When general platitudes are the only form of communication, this tends to obviate or depersonalize the faculty member’s contributions. Examples of reassurance of

worth from peers included extensions of friendship, camaraderie, and offers to collaborate.

Comments throughout the interviews pertained to burnout, which arose as a subtheme from lack of reassurance of worth. Participants described competition among peers, noting the difference between healthy competition and pejorative competition. They described the tension that exists among some faculty within and across departments as they vie for awards and resources; statements made about peer work being ungrounded in science; and the absence of acknowledgement from peers and supervisors of their colleague’s meaningful institutional and professional service endeavors. Likewise, they described how

Table 3. Reassurance of Worth Theme and Example Quotes Identified From Semi-structured Interviews With Pharmacy Faculty Regarding Ways to Improve Worklife and Mitigate Burnout<sup>a</sup>

Nature of Communication Example	Burnout	Participant	Example Quotes
Any	Mitigator	7	“I feel like they value my expertise when {they} want you to present...we want you to be on our student’s dissertation committee, you bring so much ... {instead of} they have so many responsibilities, let’s not disturb ... at least make the offer.”
		2	“For me, it’s not about kind of coming and telling me ... ‘you’re so great’ but the fact that you reach out to me and say, ‘hey, this might be good for you.’”
		4	“Asking you to participate and share your observations in different settings.”
		6	“My current department chair does honestly what a department chair should do ... they reach out and ask ...”
Informal	Mitigator	5	“A ‘high five’ section where we try to have people talk about like ‘hey here’s something cool that happened ... we have people talk about other people who won’t say the cool thing that happened to them, but we know it happened ... we try to just high five the process ...”
		3	“The people I’m closest to and know well are the people that like check in on you now again: ‘is everything ok?’”
Formal	Contributor	5	“There are so many ways [your value can be communicated to you] and some are kind of formal and can be yucky.”
		7	“Thank you for the work you do ... sometimes can be very bureaucratic and you know, the dean says that to everybody. Thank you to the faculty, blah, blah, blah.”
Tangible/ Instrumental	Mitigator	1	“We go on hikes.”
		2	“sent me a gratitude journal.”
		7	“You know what, we have a girl. I have some clothes {she} doesn’t need anymore.”
Events	Mitigator	8	“little handwritten notes.”
		2	“lunch ... happy hour.”
		8	“Interprofessional events between out PA and pharmacy students.
		5	“Dinner and drinks and it’s like an evening out ... six times a year ... we talked about the paper ... but just hanging out.”
		6	“Faculty Cocktail hours.”
Any	Contributor	7	“They’ll be like hey, bring your kids ... they would put out games.”
		4	“It tends to be biased toward research ... focused mostly on publications and grants ... they most definitely should be acknowledged. It’s a tremendous amount of work, but ... there are other kinds of accomplishments that aren’t sitting in that research bucket ... there’s not a lot for ... service.
		6	“You want to recognize folks for doing good work ... but some of us aren’t necessarily bringing in big amounts of NIH dollars ... for my field there just simply aren’t NIH dollars to bring in ... the university chooses to place its attention in other ways.”
		7	“[my work] doesn’t get acknowledged because that is not something that brings money to the school.”
Any	Mitigator	3	We do compete with each other for other things like service obligations or teaching ... as lowly social sciences or ... practice, because you don’t really do real science anyway...”
		7	“The buffer seems to be like the things that you love about your job, the things that make you feel accomplished, like getting the grants, working with students, having those publications, all of these things remind you, ‘oh, I love this.’”

<sup>a</sup>Motivating language sub-theme: meaning-making: reinforcing roles.

supervisors often assumed certain tasks and experiences were pedantic, whereas peers found satisfaction from the same experiences when shared with each other.

The need for direction-giving language was commensurate with the need for the social provision of guidance and contextualized in representative quotes. Participant 5 stated, "I personally find it super helpful to be able to point to [the promotion and tenure document] and go 'you need... 20 papers and you need to have... a grant worth \$250,000 or more or you're not getting tenure.'" They appreciated when colleagues provided specific direction-giving guidance on projects such as grant applications. Participant 7 noted, "[My colleague] said 'I'm going to send you my example... feel free to edit and just put it in your application.'" Participant 8 expressed concern that the remote teaching and social distancing that resulted from COVID-19 prevention could negatively impact this direction-giving guidance, stating "We're all asked to come in only when we teach... I predict there'll be more burnout because there's less socialization among our colleagues... there's a lack of opportunities to get that sort of casual guidance."

There were also similarities between the dimension of empathetic language and the social provision of reassurance of worth. Participants preferred empathetic language to be practical. They experienced reassurance of worth when supervisors and colleagues asked them to contribute, or collaborate, or checked in with them on projects. As participant 2 put it, "For me, it's not about kind of coming and telling me, 'you're so great' but the fact that they reach out to me and say, 'hey, this might be good for you.'" Participant 7 described how she felt valued when "they want you to present... 'we want you to be on our student's dissertation committee... you bring so much' instead of 'they have so many responsibilities, let's not disturb.' At least make the offer." Participant 3 noted no expectation for coddling from a supervisor: "You don't become a professor if you aren't self-sufficient." But they added, "The people I'm closest to and know well are the people that, like, check in on you now again: 'is everything okay?'"

Participants articulated the importance of each dimension as being strategic, leader-initiated, and communicated verbally, and emphasized that actions must match words. Participants expressed satisfaction when these elements were present and frustration when they were not. Participant 5 provided an example of a leader-initiated "high five" that provided reassurance of worth, as well as reliable alliance. The leader "tried to have people talk about... something cool that happened... we have people talk about other people who won't say the cool thing that happened to them, but we know it happened... we try to just high five the process, you know, if somebody has turned in a big grant, whether you got it or not, you know, that's a high five." Participant 1

stressed the importance of verbal messages: "There's so much signaling that you miss between written vs spoken... so when you have in-person communication, I think that's the ideal."

## DISCUSSION

This study employed the theories of motivating language and social provisions to discern the types of language used by academic peers and supervisors that add to or detract from an academician's assurance of worth and mitigate burnout. Participants described professional experiences where they felt valued, and other instances where language content, tone, style, or initiation contributed to feelings of depersonalization, which is one of the three primary components of burnout.<sup>13,26</sup> They also noted the failings of some peers and supervisors to directly acknowledge other's accomplishments and how this contributed to feeling burned out.

Participants, particularly those in clinical practice, commented on the challenges associated with infrequent and vague direction-giving language. For example, Rynes and colleagues described how academic supervisors often fall short in their communications to practice faculty in regard to effectively translating their knowledge and experience.<sup>36</sup> Anderson<sup>37</sup> described how practitioners can struggle in a "sea of academia," drowning and splashing without clear direction from supervisors. Work environments comprised of faculty from various disciplines and different areas of scientific prowess can expand the chasm.<sup>38</sup>

Faculty are expected to be self-starters and engage in self-leadership practices: however, the ability to self-lead is enhanced when supervisors create a climate conducive to self-motivation.<sup>31</sup> Motivating language by supervisors and peers, especially with persons having autonomous jobs, positively impacts job satisfaction, performance, and intention to remain with an organization, while generalized platitudes discourage constructive thought strategies by the autonomous worker.<sup>31</sup> The participants in this study described such occurrences, making specific references to use of boilerplate language in emails and other interpersonal communications that failed to acknowledge specific contributions. Professional inefficacy has been identified as one of three primary contributors to burnout, and can result from consistently vague and disingenuous language from peers and supervisors.<sup>39</sup>

Blackmore and Kandiko<sup>40</sup> argued for use of effective motivation strategies in the "prestige economy" that often prevails in academia. Participants in our study concurred and pointed to specific motivators, such as clear directives on improving effectiveness and reaching goals, acknowledgements of achievements (eg, recognition

in newsletters), and celebrations that commemorate accomplishments.

An academic conundrum occurs when faculty engage in pursuit of allies and collaborators, while concurrently attempting to bolster their own status. Mixed messaging and poorly constructed communications can jeopardize potentially valuable relationships. When emanating from academic supervisors, such language can have a deleterious, depressive impact on faculty performance and enthusiasm.<sup>41</sup> Our participants pointed to such behaviors, such as a collaboration where one fails to attribute credit to other's innovative work. These lapses in communication have been shown to potentiate scholarly anomie and burnout.<sup>42</sup> Exhibiting collegiality is not always easy, even by the most well-intentioned; nor is use of motivating language. Even minimally effective language does not come naturally for many academicians and administrators. It is particularly challenging in some roles, such as that of the department chair who must judiciously balance communications between upper administration and faculty. Kouzes and Posner<sup>38</sup> recommend that exemplary leadership focus on language consistent with that of the organization's values and actions.

The results of this study augment existing literature by providing additional insight on enhancing academic communications and mitigating burnout. Clear expectations and direction-giving must be communicated by supervisors to faculty. Reassurance of worth is enhanced through formal gestures of recognition, provision of resources, demonstrations of trust, and congruence between face-to-face and written messaging. Supervisors should provide social space for informal mentoring and community building among peers. Collegial respect and appreciation are demonstrated through informal, organic, verbal conversations that convey empathy, fairness, and interest even in small accomplishments. Peers should not assume others are too busy or want to stay in disciplinary silos. Faculty appreciate those who invite collaboration, share ideas, and provide support. Team teaching, guest lecturing, or/and collaborative research are all opportunities to enhance communication and promote reassurance of worth.

A direct benefit from this study was the creation of an interview guide based on underpinnings of theoretical frameworks. However, other researchers may have derived different questions based on these frameworks. Although lived experiences do not change, the level of detail and probing in this study would likely differ among differing interviewers, evoking somewhat different results, which is another limitation. Additionally, all study participants were from the profession of pharmacy. Faculty from other fields may have responded differently. Similarly, roles and organizational cultures differ among pharmacy practice settings;

therefore, these results should not be extrapolated to the entire body of pharmacy faculty. Future research could entail the development of a quantitative survey to investigate the prevalence of use of various strategies that inform strong academic governance and best practices in collegial communication.

## CONCLUSION

Faculty contributions within an organization are best acknowledged through empathetic, personal language that provides reassurance of the faculty member's worth, and thus adds to a more positive workplace environment that mitigates burnout. This study demonstrated the usefulness of motivating language theory and social provisions in guiding those communications among pharmacy academicians.

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