

THE FUTURE OF BURNOUT

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In this closing section of the book we will try to strike a balance and see what the future holds for the burnout construct. First: What do we have? What has been achieved by the recent developments in theory and research? What contributions have been made by the chapters included in this book? And what issues are still unresolved? Of course, we can only deal with these issues in a somewhat global manner. The reader is referred to the chapters for more detailed information.

Second: What do we need? What still remains to be done in the field of burnout? We will elaborate on six directions for future theorizing and research. In our opinion, the current volume provides a number of suggestions that could be used as guidelines.

WHAT DO WE HAVE?

A Relevant Construct

In burnout we have a concept that is highly relevant, socially as well as academically. As was described in the first chapter, burnout emerged as a social problem rather than as a scholarly issue. As far as we can see, it will continue to be a relevant social topic in the near future as well because the sociocultural and socioeconomic developments that foster burnout remain active. For instance, the increasing individualization in our society affects the traditional social structure (e.g., community, family). This causes people to rely more and more on professionals for help, advice, support, and care. Accordingly, the workload in the human services increases, but at the same time there is considerable political and economic pressure to cut back public funds, which leads to an understaffing of these institutions. In other words, more work has to be performed by fewer people. It is reasonable to assume that this situation contributes to the emotional depletion of the professionals involved.

During the last decade burnout has sparked a great deal of theoretical thinking and empirical research. This book demonstrates that burnout has been placed successfully on the academic agenda. It seems to be a concept that can guide serious theoretical as well as empirical investigation. Moreover, the burnout concept appears to be a fruitful extension and deepening of the traditional occupational stress research area. There is a great need to study particular work-related strains in particular work environments and this is precisely the type of contribution that burnout research tries to make.

A Construct To Be Conceptually Integrated

With burnout we have a construct with the potential to be integrated in a wider theoretical framework. The contributions in this book cover three levels of conceptual integration. First, burnout is considered from four general psychological perspectives. Buunk and Schaufeli (Chapter 4) investigate burnout from a social comparison point of view, drawing on the seminal work of Schachter, among others, on social affiliation. Hobfoll and Freedy (Chapter 7) apply a general stress theory to burnout—the recently developed conservation of resources approach. Cherniss (Chapter 8) uses the early work of Hall and Bandura on motivation to develop the concept of professional self-efficacy, which he uses as a unifying theoretical construct to understand burnout. Finally, Cox, Kuk, and Leiter (Chapter 11) try to integrate burnout conceptually within the transactional model of occupational stress, which was developed by the first author.

Second, in a number of contributions, burnout is linked somewhat more eclectically with elements from several theoretical approaches. For instance, in

order to understand burnout, Pines (Chapter 3), Burisch (Chapter 5), Hallsten (Chapter 6), Winnubst (Chapter 9), and Noworol et al. (Chapter 10) borrow concepts from existential psychology, action theory, ego psychology, organizational theory, and the psychology of creativity, respectively.

Finally, several authors offer a description of a model of burnout that is based mainly on the outcomes of their empirical research, i.e., Maslach's multidimensional perspective (Chapter 2), Golembiewski's phase model (Chapter 13), and Leiter's process model (Chapter 14).

A Common Language

With burnout we have a common language to denote a particular phenomenon. The definition of burnout has been an issue from the very beginning, as indicated in the first chapter. In recent years, there has been more consensual agreement on an operational definition of burnout, largely because of the development of validated research measures, particularly the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Consequently, researchers now have a common language for studying burnout and can make direct comparisons between their own findings and those of others—thus allowing new studies to build on the contributions of previous ones. As shown by Schaufeli, Enzmann, and Girault (Chapter 12), the MBI has encouraging psychometric properties. Moreover, Golembiewski et al. demonstrated in Chapter 13 that this instrument can be used in cross-national studies. However, there is still discussion and debate about the definition of burnout, as indicated by the contributions of Burisch (Chapter 5) and Hallsten (Chapter 6).

A Common Occupational Context

With burnout we have a common occupational context. That is, burnout has been studied primarily in the human services where professionals are doing "people" work of some kind. What is special about their work is that their tools are their own social skills, attitudes, and personality characteristics in addition to their professional technical abilities. The professionals' relationship with the recipient is the vehicle for change and hence the source of accomplishment (or of failure). At the same time, this relationship is demanding and exhausting by its very nature—recipients are troubled or suffering, and they are asking for assistance of some kind. Thus, in contrast to other types of occupational strain, burnout results from interpersonal processes with recipients as well as from an interplay of individual and organizational factors. Viewed from this perspective, burnout has a specific etiology that is linked to a particular professional domain.

Although burnout is studied most intensively in human service professions, similar processes might occur in other areas as well. Some authors, such as

Pines (Chapter 3), Burisch (Chapter 5), Hallsten (Chapter 6), and Winnubst (Chapter 9), argue that burnout is a much more general phenomenon that is not restricted to professionals who work with other people in some capacity.

Specific Methodologies

With burnout we have some specific methodologies that can be applied in research. For instance, the "phase model" of Golembiewski, Scherb, and Boudreau (Chapter 13) classifies individuals in eight different categories of burnout. Although this model has been criticized by Leiter (Chapter 14) on several grounds, the authors can claim a cross-national validity for their model.

WHAT DO WE NEED?

Theory-Driven Research

We need more theory-driven studies on burnout. This book shows that there is an alternative to the blind empiricism that was typical for so many early studies on burnout (see Chapter 1). As indicated above, we now have a number of interesting approaches that try to integrate burnout into larger conceptual frameworks such as social comparison theory (Chapter 4), general stress theory (Chapter 7), occupational stress theory (Chapter 11), and motivational theory (Chapter 8). These recent developments open the possibility of studying burnout within a broader theoretical context: i.e., more general psychological concepts can be applied to burnout. The main focus of this type of study is the theoretical integration of the burnout construct into larger, overarching psychological frameworks.

A second avenue of theory-driven research is more problem-oriented and involves the etiology of burnout. In this book, three types of etiological factors of burnout are distinguished: interpersonal, individual, and organizational. In each of the corresponding three sections of the book, theoretical notions and models are introduced that can function as cornerstones for empirical research on the etiology of burnout. Although some of the proposed models are not very easy to test empirically, e.g., Burisch' action model, they do provide some guidelines for theory-driven research.

Finally, theory-driven research (including etiological studies) should concentrate on the process on burnout rather than on the end state. This calls not only for longitudinal research designs but for particular conceptualizations, e.g., hypotheses about the sequential relationships of the burnout dimensions. Many approaches to burnout in this book explicitly stress the importance of such process models of burnout (Chapters 2, 5, 6, 14).

Different Assessment Methods

We need to expand the methodologies used and include measures other than self-report, such as indices of job performance, turnover and absenteeism rates, ratings by others (clients, supervisors, peers, family), physiological assessments of health, and so forth. The self-report indicators of burnout that have been employed until now lack any validation against such kinds of measures (Chapter 12).

Base Rate Information

We need more information about burnout base rates. There are no descriptive statistics that will allow us to answer such basic questions as the following: What is the frequency of burnout? Do many people experience it or just a few? Is the burnout rate 1%, 10%, 50%, 90%? Does the burnout rate vary by occupation? Once someone experiences burnout, how long does it last? Do people have repeated episodes of burnout, or does it only happen once? Do most people recover from burnout, or is their subsequent work impaired in some way? Although there has been much speculation about the answers to these questions, and various percentage rates have been proposed, there is as yet no solid set of statistics on which these answers can be based. Even when large surveys have been done, which could possibly generate some base rate statistics, they have often been limited by having self-selected, nonrepresentative subject populations (Chapter 12).

Cross-National Research

We need more cross-national research. Now that burnout research has spread outside the English-speaking countries, the need for systematic cross-national research is more urgent. Most studies on burnout have been conducted in the United States, but do the conclusions from these studies hold in the other national or cultural settings? This is by no means self-evident because important differences exist between countries in value systems (e.g., the meaning of work), organization of services (e.g., state or private), and the type of systems for health care and social security (e.g., in some countries, such as The Netherlands, employees can be declared work-disabled on psychological grounds, whereas in other countries this is impossible).

It appears that the MBI can be used in cross-national settings (Chapter 13). Apparently, burnout is experienced similarly in different countries: i.e., identical dimensions were found across countries. However, the question of whether levels and correlates of burnout are also comparable across countries is still an open one.

Criterion Levels

We need criterion levels for burnout. That is, at what point or level of experience does burnout become a true problem? Is it really a serious enough problem to warrant serious attention? The position taken by some critics is that it is a common experience for people to dislike their job at some point but that this dislike (or "burnout") does not lead people to have any major difficulties in doing their work. In other words, it has not been shown conclusively that burnout is causally related to objective outcomes of consequence and importance. Thus, another task for researchers is to provide empirical evidence for the seriousness of burnout as a social problem.

There are three areas where this could be done: the job (with such outcomes as turnover, job withdrawal behaviors, deterioration of job performance), the home (marital or familial conflict), and the individual (decline in physical and mental health). This underlines the previous arguments for the inclusion of measures that are not exclusively based on self-reports.

When more is known about criterion levels of burnout, valid cutoff points (e.g., on the MBI) can be determined that would allow for a differentiation of "burnout cases" from "noncases." In other words, individual diagnosis of burnout will be possible when we have adequate information on criterion levels.

Longitudinal Research Designs

We need longitudinal research designs. It is only through longitudinal designs that causal relationships can be established between burnout and both its precipitating factors and its outcomes. Although discussions of burnout are often filled with statements of presumed cause and effect, they are often based on the results of correlational, cross-sectional designs that do not permit such causal inferences (Chapter 14). In addition to providing better evidence for causal relationships, longitudinal studies would yield valuable information about the development and successive phases of burnout. The latter was put forward previously when the need for understanding the process of burnout was discussed. Longitudinal studies are very costly in terms of time, effort, and resources, and thus present a large challenge to any researcher. However, it is clear that such studies will be critical to our understanding of burnout.

Evaluation Research

We need good evaluation research with respect to burnout interventions. Although there are many ideas about how to deal with burnout (Chapters 3, 7, 8, 11), and some of these ideas may have been put into operation, there is virtually no concrete empirical evidence as to whether any of these interventions have actually worked. Part of the problem here is that researchers are often not

involved in the implementation of an intervention, and thus are not in a position to define the critical variables (e.g., what behavior is predicted to change) or to collect the necessary information for evaluation (e.g., baseline measures prior to the intervention).

Another issue is that the long-term impact of any intervention is not easy to assess, largely because of the problems involved in doing longitudinal research. However, if a major goal of studying burnout is to determine effective strategies for dealing with it, then evaluation research will be absolutely crucial.

CONCLUSION

And so, at last, we come to the end of our journey through the field of burnout. What should be evident from this trip is that there is now a more clearly demarcated map of the burnout terrain. We know more (although not all) about the phenomenon of burnout, its antecedents and its consequences, and we also know more about what needs to be discovered. Although we can recognize some of the important landmarks of burnout, our map would be improved if we could fill in many of the critical details. Our group of international travelers has spoken in many languages, both cultural and conceptual, and has added much to both our knowledge and skills for the next stage of the trip. We have made some great strides since the beginning of the work on burnout, but there are distant horizons that have yet to be reached. It is our hope that this volume has functioned as an essential guidebook for this journey, and that it has succeeded in pointing out future paths for the next decade of travelers along the burnout road.