Factors and consequences of Burnout Syndrome in university teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic

DOI: 10.46932/sfjdv4n10-024

Received in: November 24th, 2023
Accepted in: December 28th, 2023

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the current global health crisis caused by COVID-19, a series of significant challenges affecting both physical and psychological health of populations have been identified. This study aims to investigate the prevalence and manifestation of burnout syndrome among the teaching staff of public universities in Andalusia during this pandemic period. Using a quantitative research methodology, with a non-experimental and descriptive cross-sectional design, teachers were selected through non-probabilistic intentional sampling. The results revealed urgent need for educational institutions to develop effective strategies for managing and preventing this professional weariness syndrome is highlighted.

Keywords: burnout syndrome, university teaching, COVID-19, work stress, mental health.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of profound transformations in society have occurred, leading to an increase in pressure and anxiety, a widespread and specific fear of contagion, as well as feelings of frustration, isolation, and uncertainty about the future, together with an overload of work. This unprecedented situation has exacerbated pre-existing conditions, contributing to an increase in physical and mental fatigue, anxiety, stress, and exhaustion, especially among university teachers. On the other hand, the potential negative psychological effects directly associated with the conditions of confinement, the intrinsic characteristics of the pandemic, and the multiple associated factors, have
qualified confinement as an event of high psychosocial stress, potentially with a greater psychological impact than other life events. Aspects such as the ambiguity and uncontrollability of the threat (i.e., the coronavirus), its invisible and unpredictable nature, the lethality of the pathogen, or the variability in the truthfulness of the information provided by the media, can in themselves generate psychological disorders related to the perception of a threat to personal health. The concerns, fears, and/or anxiety of confined people could also be linked to other secondary factors, such as the health of loved ones, the potential collapse of health systems, work problems and income losses, the global spread of the virus, and its economic and social consequences.

1.1 CONCEPTUALIZATION

In the academic field, burnout syndrome is recognized as a complex phenomenon with significant repercussions on the physical and psychological health of affected individuals. Although its study originated in the work context, its scope has extended to multiple spheres of life. The conceptualization of burnout has evolved significantly since the term was introduced by Freudenberger in 1974, with important contributions from authors such as Cherniss (1980), Maslach and Jackson (1981), Pines & Aronson (1988), and Shirom (1989). Of these, the proposal by Maslach and Jackson has gained wide acceptance, although in recent years the conceptualization of Shirom has gained recognition. Burnout syndrome is characterized not only by its effects on performance and well-being in the work environment but also by its impact on the individual's personal life. This bidirectional interaction between the work and personal spheres of burnout syndrome has been the subject of analysis and study by various researchers, highlighting the contributions of Peeters et al. (2005), Lacovides et al. (2003), Schaufeli et al. (2001), Demerouti et al. (2000), and Hellesøy et al. (2000). Freudenberger's initial definition described burnout as a feeling of failure and exhaustion resulting from an excessive demand on the worker's personal, energetic, or spiritual resources.

1.2 CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE SYNDROME

Regarding the conceptualizations of the syndrome, the operational definitions of Cherniss, Maslach and Jackson, Pines & Aronson, and Shirom are highlighted, with Maslach and Jackson's being the most cited in the literature and used in empirical research. According to Maslach and Schaufeli (1993), despite differences in application and precision, most of the proposed definitions share common elements: a) predominance of fatigue symptoms such as emotional and mental exhaustion; b) presence of atypical physical symptoms of exhaustion; c) association of symptoms with work; d) manifestation in individuals without prior psychopathologies; and e) decrease in efficacy and deterioration of work performance due to negative behaviors and attitudes. The absence of a consensus definition of burnout poses challenges for
its study and results in a fragmented theoretical framework, mainly due to the diversity of definitions and the generalization of its incidence in all occupational fields.

Garcés de los Fayos (1999) notes that, after Freudenberger’s definition and the contributions of Maslach and Jackson, as well as those of Pines et al., there have been few original contributions to the definition of burnout, revolving around these definitions and adding nuances specific to the context of the research, without substantially altering the original definitions. In an effort to clarify the concept of burnout syndrome, numerous researchers have made significant efforts to identify it and differentiate it from related concepts such as stress, adjustment disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, anxiety, and depression, with notable works by Shirom et al. (2005), Shirom and Ezrachi (2003), Lacovides et al. (2003), Serrano et al. (2002), and Maslach et al. (2001).

1.3 STRESS AND BURNOUT

The distinction between stress and burnout, while recognized in the scientific literature, presents blurred boundaries, sharing certain characteristics while differing in others. The predominant conceptualization of burnout as a process resulting from chronic exposure to work-related stress is widely accepted. However, there is debate over the nature of their relationship.

The main controversy centers on the interpretation of burnout as a consequence of prolonged exposure to stressful conditions in the work environment. This perspective is evident in the literature, where the specific characteristics and manifestations of each are distinguished. Serrano et al. (2002) provide a detailed comparison of the fundamental differences between stress and burnout. In this comparison, it is established that burnout syndrome and stress, although distinct concepts, share certain elements but diverge in other key aspects. Burnout does not diminish with vacations, unlike stress, which usually eases with rest and relaxation. Burnout is not necessarily associated with an overload of work and can arise in low-stress but demotivating jobs.

Its nature is insidious, developing slowly over time, while stress is a general response of the organism to a stressful stimulus. Burnout affects all professions, being more prevalent in sectors such as teaching and healthcare, while stress is associated with people who have ideas of omnipotence, unrealistic aspirations, long working hours, and overloaded agendas. Burnout arises from organizational factors, work climate, and the work environment's culture, in contrast to stress that results from the interaction of multiple stressors and personality structure. Personal characteristics are modulating variables in burnout, unlike stress, where personality type plays a more determining role. In burnout, negative characteristics such as lack of assertiveness, low self-esteem, and dependence tend to generate the syndrome, while in stress, characteristics such as altruism and commitment can be contributing factors.
1.4 MODELING BY MASLACH, SCHAUFELI, AND LEITER (2001)

According to Maslach et al. (2001), the initial contributions to the study of burnout include the identification of the fundamental bases of the phenomenon and the recognition of its prevalence among people, not being isolated cases. These descriptive and qualitative studies, which included techniques such as interviews, case studies, and direct observations, initially considered burnout as specific to professionals in social and health services, due to the belief that it was caused by direct contact with other people in helping contexts.

Regarding the empirical phase, Maslach et al. (2001) indicate that this stage began in the 1980s, differentiating from the previous phase in that research on Burnout research became more empirical, with the use of questionnaires and surveys, focusing on broader populations and measuring the syndrome through the development of various assessment tools. During this period, significant advances were made in measuring burnout, using more sophisticated methodologies and statistical tools. This period was also characterized by the recognition that burnout affects people in various professions, not just social service professionals.

Different researchers explanatory models of burnout vary, mainly in the order of appearance of the three components of the syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Although there is no unanimous acceptance of the conceptual definition of the construct, there is a general consensus that these three components, identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981), constitute the core of the burnout syndrome, accepting its three-dimensional nature.

Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being overwhelmed and emotionally worn out, as a result of the constant interactions that workers must maintain among themselves and with clients. For Maslach et al. (2001), the exhaustion component represents the basic dimension of stress. Depersonalization, on the other hand, represents the interpersonal context dimension of burnout, involving the development of cynical and distant attitudes towards the people being served. Authors like Gil-Monte and Peiró (1999) specify that this dimension is associated with excessive separation from other people, the use of derogatory attitudes, and attempts to blame others for one's own frustration.

Finally, reduced personal accomplishment, according to Maslach et al. (2001), represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout. This dimension involves a loss of confidence in personal accomplishment and a negative self-concept. It may lead to rejection of oneself and personal achievements, as well as feelings of failure and low self-esteem.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a non-experimental, quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional approach. Data collection employed the Spanish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The
target population consisted of teachers at public universities in Andalusia. The sample was obtained through non-probabilistic intentional sampling, selecting teachers who had worked continuously from the start of the pandemic and lockdown until April 30, 2021, without having requested any type of leave during this period. Fieldwork was carried out during May and June 2021. Confidentiality of the provided data was maintained at all times, ensuring voluntary and anonymous participation of the teachers. For data analysis and processing, the statistical software SPSS version 27 was used, applying the cut-off points established by Maslach and Jackson (1986) for the dimensions of the burnout syndrome.

The Spanish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), designed to assess and quantify the prevalence of burnout syndrome in teachers, consists of 22 items in the form of statements that evaluate three dimensions of the syndrome: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). Participants rate each item on the questionnaire using a Likert-type scale, indicating how often they have experienced the situation described in the item over the past year. Subsequently, the scores for each dimension are summed. This frequency scale has seven levels, ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The MBI is recognized for its excellent internal consistency and reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values of 0.9 for the Emotional Exhaustion dimension, 0.79 for Depersonalization, and 0.71 for Personal Accomplishment, according to the manual by Seisdedos (1997). The calculation of the scores obtained in each dimension is performed by adding the values assigned by the respondents to the items corresponding to each dimension.

3 RESULTS

To assess the reliability of the instrument used and its constituent dimensions, the Cronbach's alpha technique was applied. In the context of this study, the global reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91, indicating high reliability. As for the specific dimensions, the Emotional Exhaustion dimension obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, t alpha of 0.81 was obtained for the Depersonalization dimension and an alpha of 0.83 for the Personal Accomplishment dimension, thus corroborating the internal consistency and reliability of the instrument. It is important to emphasize that scores for each dimension should be kept separate and not be summed into a single score. The prevalence of burnout syndrome in each participant of the sample was evaluated, considering that higher scores in the dimensions of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization, and lower scores in the Personal Accomplishment dimension, indicate a higher level of burnout. Conversely, low burnout is characterized by low levels in the dimensions of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization, and high levels in the Personal Accomplishment dimension. Medium levels of burnout are found in other possible combinations.

The results for the Emotional Exhaustion Dimension showed that 73% of the surveyed teachers experienced a high degree of emotional exhaustion, 19.5% a medium degree, and only 7.5% a low degree
in this dimension. Emotional exhaustion in the sample was attributed to factors such as workload overload, emotional fatigue, frustration, tiredness before starting the workday, work burnout, excessive effort and dedication to students, as well as a high level of tension derived from teaching dedication.

In the Depersonalization Dimension, 67% of the participants showed a high degree in this dimension, 26% a medium degree, and 7% a low degree. This dimension is characterized by the development of attitudes of cynicism, pessimism, negativity, insensitivity, and indifference, reflecting a distant posture towards students.

Regarding the Personal Accomplishment Dimension, it was found that 6.4% of the surveyed teachers experienced a high degree in this dimension, 20.6% a medium degree, and 73% a low degree. This dimension assesses aspects such as understanding, altruism, motivation, effectiveness in student care, and esteem towards work. It is notable that a high percentage of teachers reported a high degree of emotional exhaustion combined with low personal accomplishment.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrate significant wear and tear on the emotional resources of university teachers, attributable to the work demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A high degree of cynicism and a pattern of distant attitudes towards students were observed, as well as a notable decrease in feelings of efficacy, motivation, and personal accomplishment in their teaching role. The prevalence of burnout syndrome among university teachers is alarmingly high, with a greater incidence in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, compared to the personal accomplishment dimension.

The stressors identified in this work include workload overload, emotional fatigue, frustration, exhaustion before starting the workday, work burnout, excessive effort and dedication to students, as well as a high level of tension derived from teaching dedication. Additionally, attitudes of cynicism, pessimism, negativity, insensitivity, indifference, and low personal realization and motivation are highlighted. These findings underline the need to empower university teachers with resilience strategies to neutralize the identified stressors and effectively face the current and future challenges arising from the ongoing pandemic.

Educational institutions must reconsider and adapt teaching-learning strategies and tactics to the circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, those responsible for managing teaching staff must prioritize the occupational health of human capital. This involves conducting studies that allow for appropriate allocation of teaching load and other academic obligations, as well as valuing aspects such as remuneration, motivation, and recognition of teaching staff under current circumstances.
Ultimately, improvements in working conditions must be implemented that balance the demands of the institution with the expectations and aspirations of teachers.

Universities and other higher education institutions must include, among their sustainable development goals in occupational health, the study of the manifestation and prevalence of burnout syndrome in their teaching staff. This should be considered as a sustainable and socially responsible practice. University teachers need access to preventive measures that avoid the development of work-related stress leading to burnout, as well as specialized assistance and coping strategies to effectively manage the demands of their profession.
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