

Burnout in Social Workers: a Study in Residential Placement for Children and Youth at Risk

Beatriz Farinha¹, Luis Picado², and Fernanda Carvalho³

CI-ISCE – Centro de Investigação do ISCE - Instituto Superior de Lisboa e Vale do Tejo.

ISCE - Instituto Superior de Lisboa e Vale do Tejo.

**Corresponding author: Beatriz Farinha*

ABSTRACT

In this study we analyze the incidence of professional burnout in social workers that works in residential placement for children and young people at risk. We also explore the perceptions relative to the working climate and the predictors of professional burnout.

The results demonstrate that the social workers have burnout in subscales of emotional exhaustion and personal achievement. We also verify that the work climate influences the motivation of workers in the development of functions.

We confirm that the significant predictors of emotional exhaustion are: perceived stressors - time pressures, ambiguity and role conflict and inadequate professional training; the perceived global stress; and the objective work overload indicator.

Finally, the analysis suggests that depersonalization is the most complex of the three dimensions of burnout, having as significant predictors all types of variables considered: sociodemographic variables - age and sex; the sources of perceived stress - bad climate and inadequate professional training; the forms of coping by denial and avoidance; by competition and by disorganization.

Keywords: burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal achievement

I. INTRODUCTION

Burnout Syndrome is a psychological phenomenon that translates into emotional exhaustion and loss of elements such as motivation, interest in the function that develops and is related to exhaustion experiences. In its cause, there are several factors, whether personal, organizational and environmental (Ferreira, 2018).

This syndrome is manifested in different professions, but it seems to be more pronounced in those that are related to work with others, that is, helping professions (Marques Pinto & Picado, 2011).

In this way, it was important to analyze burnout in one of the professions that have most demands: the social workers that works in residential placement for children and youth at risk. These professionals are potentially exposed to great emotional exhaustion, due to exposure to stress, conflicts and other stimuli.

The objective of this study was to evaluate the burnout levels and the organizational climate of the social workers professionals in the context of residential placement for children and young people at risk. We, also, try to analyze how employees perceive their work climate and also if they work as a team, in order to reduce the remaining factors that potentiate the syndrome.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The causes of professional stress in the aid professions most frequently identified, in North American studies, European, and Portuguese (Marques Pinto & Picado, 2011) are: the pressure of time; problems with children and young people, including their learning difficulties, lack of motivation, emotional demands, challenging behaviors; excessive bureaucracy and administrative work; the inefficient management of social organizations and the lack of communication.

The continued confrontation with stress factors such as those described, in which workers coping attempts are ineffective, can lead to professional burnout syndrome, which is configured as a gradual reaction to cumulative and prolonged professional stress (Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach, 2009).

Professional burnout has been conceptualized according to the formulation of Maslach and collaborators (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Maslach, 2005), as a three-dimensional syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and loss of professional achievement. Emotional exhaustion is an orthodox reaction to professional stress that involves feelings of emotional exhaustion and depletion of emotional resources. Depersonalization is a coping component and refers to the adoption of negative, cold and cynical attitudes towards students. Finally, the loss of professional fulfillment, a self-evaluating component, corresponds to a decrease in the feelings of personal competence in teaching (Maslach, 1999).

Thus, burnout affects the physical and psychological well-being of social workers, their relationship and the quality of their intervention, and is associated with phenomena such as absenteeism and the intention to abandon the profession (Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999; Kyriacou, 1987; Pierce & Molloy, 1990; Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Maslach, 1999).

Conceptual models on the causes of burnout, namely in helping professions, generally propose an articulation between the factors, mentioned previously, of professional stress and coping, and also some sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, marital status. Despite the emphasis that has been given to the role of occupational stressors in fact, they explain only between 20% and 40% of the common burnout variance; coping variables, on the other hand, explain burnout variance percentages of around 5% (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998); finally, the values of the common burnout variance explained by the sociodemographic variables as a whole are between 5% and 15% (Gil-Monte & Peiró, 1997).

In this way, a more complete explanation of this syndrome calls for the joint intervention of other types of factors, and it is worth mentioning in this sense the inclusion, in some conceptual models and empirical studies, of variables that account for the social dimension of this syndrome (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), as is the case of the work climate that add predictive value to the other variables in their explanation (Marques Pinto, Lima & Lopes da Silva, 2008).

A professional group that deals with great demands and potential stress are the social workers that works with children and young people institutionalized. These professionals, in their intervention, try to approach the therapeutic reception model, in order to repair the mistreatment to which children and young people were subjected. It is intended that through reparative experiences, internal emotional, behavioral and social changes are produced (Matos et al 2011). We speak of children who, as a result of negative impact experiences, have weaknesses in terms of internal structures, and therefore, lack of a secure base (Matos, B., Aguiar, C., Martins, C., Gama, I., Pires, L., Dias, J., & Queirós, S., 2011).

Despite the lack of a specific theoretical and methodological framework to the social workers, we can apply the same forms of assessment that study the types of causal relationships with the same types of factors, namely personal and organizational that are used for the study of Burnout.

III. METHODS

The goal of this study was to analyze the incidence of professional burnout in social workers which work in Residential Placement for Children and Young People at Risk. We also explore the perceptions relative to the working climate and the predictors of professional burnout.

Using a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative type (Creswell, 2007), using self-report questionnaires, constituted with open and closed questions.

The subjects of this study are social workers employees of an institution for the care of institutionalized children and young people. These employees monitor the daily lives of children and young people, they develop their action in direct with them. They are part of the technical and educational / auxiliary teams, consisting of six technical directors, seven social assistants, five psychologists, six child educators, eight social educators, forty-seven educational action assistants, eight general service assistants, six cooks, a kitchen helper, interns and volunteers.

The elements belonging to the administration were not included in this investigation, namely the president, the presidents of the assembly and the fiscal council, the headquarters and the technical evaluation centers, training counseling, houses council, research and marketing. This option was due to the fact that they do not work directly with institutionalized children and young people.

For the application of the conceived methodology and subsequent data processing, we chose a convenience sample. This means that the sample includes workers who were in exercise and who were willing to participate in this study. The sample consists of 39 participants in a universe of 74 individuals. The subjects were studied in 2019, from January to July.

Instruments and Materials

We use self-report questionnaires, on the assumption that study participants are able to make valid judgments about their sources and experiences related to the work climate, team work and burnout.

In this study, two self-assessment questionnaires were used and some questions of socio-demographic characterization were asked.

A first questionnaire consists of open and closed questions. A specialist participated in the pre-test of the elaborated instrument, who has twenty years of experience in the elaboration of methodological studies in the health area. Data collection took place in a single moment, in person and individually, and took place, with the discussion of the instrument's items and associated appendices.

The second MBI-Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educators Survey questionnaire developed by Maslach and collaborators (1996), Portuguese version of Marques Pinto and collaborators (Marques Pinto, Lima & Lopes da Silva, 2003). This instrument, widely used in empirical studies on Burnout Syndrome (Appendix B), is characterized by a self-assessment scale, where the objective is for individuals to assess how often they feel certain feelings broken down into sentences (Maroco, J., & Tecedreiro, M., 2009). With regard to the MBI - Educators Survey, we highlight that it is very similar to the MBI - Human Services Survey (the 1st version of the MBI), replacing the term "user" with the term "student" (Maslach et al, 1996). In our research we keep the term user, given the typology of the participants.

This questionnaire allows to evaluate three dimensions of Burnout syndrome: 9 items for the subscale of Emotional Exhaustion (ex: "I feel worn out at the end of the work day"), 5 items for Depersonalization (ex: "I feel that I treat some students as if they are impersonal objects ") and 8 for Professional Achievement (ex: "I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students "), evaluated on a frequency scale of 7 points (corresponding to 0 to "never" and 6 to "every day").

The analysis of the internal consistency of the subscales revealed Cronbach's alpha values of 0.86 and 0.76, very close to those reported in the literature, for the Emotional Exhaustion and Loss of Professional Achievement subscales, respectively, while for the Depersonalization subscale, a coefficient of 0.56; results like these have been obtained in other studies and attributed to the reduced number of items (five) that constitute it or to conceptual problems (Marques Pinto, 2001).

Procedures

After defining the research methodology, we requested authorization to the institution's administration to carry out the study, which gave a positive response to the study.

Once the application is authorized, we clarify the ethical procedures of the investigation, request informed consent from the subjects, ensure the confidentiality of the data and the advantages of participating in the investigation.

The Questionnaire Survey was applied through a digital platform, google forms, took place over a period of approximately one month and 39 responses were obtained.

IV. FINDINGS

Regarding the distribution of sociodemographic variables, most participants are female (87.2%) and 12% are male. The majority of respondents are between 30 and 40 years old (35.9%) and 25% are over 40 years old.

Regarding educational qualifications, 76.9% of respondents have a degree and 10.3% a master's degree, the rest have basic education (7.7%) and secondary education (5.1%). Most of the participants are trained in the social and educational fields, 56.4% and 17.9%, respectively.

It should be noted that most of the answers are from the host houses in the Lisbon Region (66.7%), and the majority of respondents have been working for more than ten years (23.1%) in the host house and, 71.8% have an effective job.

Regarding the type of hours practiced, 51.3% are working in shifts and 48.7% are working on a fixed schedule. Here, the fact that the host houses work 24 hours a day and 7 days a week is emphasized. Most work more than thirty-five hours a week (51.3%) and 28.2% have a second job / job in addition to the functions developed in the host house.

With regard to the work context, the maximum capacity for the reception of houses, mostly, is 14 children / young people (28.2%), with the largest percentage going to ages between one and twelve years of age (61.5%).

Regarding the gender of the children and young people taken in, the houses are mostly female (61.5%), and only 33.3% male. The ages of children and young people are between zero and twelve years of age (61.5%) and 92.3% have problems in terms of health (physical and mental), emotional, cognitive and behavioral.

When evaluating the subjects' satisfaction regarding their professional context, it appears that 64.1% are satisfied with their work, followed by a percentage of 20.5% of respondents very satisfied and only 12.8% not very satisfied. For the question of the possibility of moving to another job / job, 61.5% say they would

change and only 38.5% would stay. The most visible reasons are salary (50%) and physical and mental fatigue (33.3%).

Regarding the work climate, 71.8% consider it positive and 10.3% negative, and most of them have a good relationship with their co-workers (97.4%).

All participants consider that the work climate influences the way they go to work, but in relation to the harmony between colleagues in relation to the objectives and mission of the institution, 66.7% responds negatively.

For the 71.8% who indicate the work climate as positive, they replied that it is, for the most part, a climate of communication, friendship and help. For the 10.3% who describe it as negative, they indicate that there is a lack of team spirit, lack of appreciation, distrust, lack of respect and intrigue.

For the participants, the key elements, with the greatest number of responses, in teamwork are communication, collaboration, respect and team spirit. In relation to the elements that can negatively affect team work, respondents more often indicated competition, conflict / selfish personalities, disorganization and lack of communication.

As for the strategies they used to self-motivate themselves, if they were not satisfied with their working climate, here most of the responses focused on the taste for the work they do, the spirit of mission and the financial need.

Incidence of professional burnout

The application of MBI, aimed to assess the Burnout levels of the social workers. According to the MBI, Burnout is conceptualized as a continuous variable, varying between levels classified as low, medium and high, based on the American standard. The sum of the total questions that contribute to the composition of each factor leads to the achievement of the following minimum and maximum values (Picado, 2007):

- Emotional Exhaustion: 9-63
- Depersonalization: 5-35
- Personal Achievement: 8-56

After analyzing all the answers given by the respondents (Annex D), the following averages were obtained, shown in the following table:

Sub-scales	Mean
Emotional Exhaustion	22.26
Depersonalization	5.49
Personal Achievement	32.69

Table 1- Means of subscales

For the analysis of MBI results it is important to clarify that for a low level of Burnout, subscales Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization should have lower values, while in the subscale Personal Achievement they should be high. For a high degree of Burnout, the values of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization should be high and Personal Achievement, values lower. For an average level of Burnout, the three subscales should represent average values (Picado, 2007).

For Emotional Exhaustion, there is high Burnout when the values are above 27 points, medium when within the range 19-26 and low when the values are below 19 points. Looking at Table 2, it appears that, in terms of Emotional Exhaustion, workers have an average level of Burnout.

Regarding Depersonalization, values above 10 points represent a high level, between 6 and 9 medium level and when below 6 it is considered a low level of Burnout. Taking into account the results obtained, it appears that the respondents are in the range that refers to a low level of Burnout.

In the last subscale, Personal Achievement, values greater than or equal to 40 points translate into low levels of Burnout, in the range 34 to 39 are considered medium level and values less than or equal to 33 correspond to a high level of the syndrome. Thus, in the Personal Achievement subscale, respondents have an average value of 32.69, which indicates that there is a high level of Burnout Syndrome.

While comparative studies, about Burnout in the specific context of the host residential placement, are unknown, we consider it relevant to compare our results with studies on the incidence of burnout, carried out with other help professionals, namely teachers. Thus, it became interesting to present in this work the MBI subscale response averages in Portugal, present in the work of Picado (2007) and compare with our study.

Comparing with the values of Portugal, at the level of the teachers (taking into account that it is a helping profession and referenced at the level of burnout), we found that the values obtained in the Emotional Exhaustion of the social workers (22.26) are higher than those teachers (19.26), are in an average Burnout position, but a little higher.

At the level of the Depersonalization Subscale, the teachers obtained a lower value (4.01), in relation to this subscale, than the social workers (5.49).

In terms of Personal Achievement, the social workers, obtained a lower value (32.69) than the teachers (34.24), which indicates that this subscale shows a slight Burnout superiority in the teachers.

We can see that these two help professions, although different, have approximate values, which allows us to conclude that developing functions with children and young people, in social or educational contexts, exposes professionals to the syndrome.

Compared to the average values in Portugal, it appears that the social workers have higher values in the subscales of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization, and slightly lower in the subscale of Personal Achievement, which reveals that, in relation to the national average, shelter workers have a higher burnout rate.

These results confirmed Burnout in the social, we can see that in the level of the subscale of Emotional Exhaustion, the social workers are at a medium level of Burnout, which as we saw earlier, translates into exhaustion and constant fatigue, accompanied by feelings of emotional overload. We also concluded that, in terms of Personal Achievement, these workers have already reached a high level of the syndrome, calling into question their personal skills as professionals, such as the ability to interact, when this profession requires the establishment of relationships with children and young people, which require a lot of reflective and discovery work. However, the low level of the Depersonalization subscale should be valued.

Predictors of the dimensions of professional burnout

We performed a series of multiple linear regression analyzes (stepwise) in order to study the predictive value, regarding the three dimensions of burnout, of a joint solution of the independent variables considered: stress factors, coping styles, social representations of burnout in teaching and sociodemographic variables (see table 2).

Table No. 2

Predictive value of the joint solution for the three dimensions of burnout.

Results of multiple regression analyzes: standardized regression coefficients (Beta) of the variables that enter the regression equation and adjusted R²

Variables	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Professional Achievement
Sociodemographic			
Age		0.10**	
Sex		0.10**	
Global Stress	0.22*		
Sources of stress			
Time pressures	0.36*		-0.16
Ambiguity and role conflict	0.29*		
Inadequacy of training	-0.23*	-0.25*	
Bad working climate		0.40*	
Overload	0.11**		
Coping			
Communication		-0.12**	
Denial and avoidance		0.30*	-0.22
Colaboration			0.27*
Competition		0.18**	
Desorganization		-0.26**	
R² adjusted	0.42(*)	0.27(**)	0.13(***)

(*) F((5,245)=37.189, p<.0000) (**) F((8,243)=12.321, p<.0000) (***) F((3,241)=13.641, p<.0000)

*p<.001 **p<.05

As can be seen in Table 2, the values of the explained common variance are 42% in the case of emotional exhaustion, 27% in the case of depersonalization and 13% in the case of personal fulfillment.

The analysis of Beta values offers empirical support for the three-dimensional definition of burnout proposed by Maslach and collaborators (Maslach, 1999; Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001), since it reveals the existence of different predictors for each dimension of burnout.

On the other hand, the Beta values also confirm the perspective of several authors (eg Greenglass, 2005) who conceptualize emotional exhaustion as an orthodox response to stress, since the significant predictors of this dimension of burnout are: perceived stressors - time pressures (0.36), ambiguity and role conflict (0.29) and inadequate professional training (B = -0.23); the perceived global stress (B = 0.22); and the objective work overload indicator (B = 0.11).

With regard to professional achievement, the beta values indicate as significant predictors: the perceived stress factor - time pressures (B = -0.16); and collaboration coping patterns (B = 0.27) and denial and avoidance (-0.22). These results highlight the role of coping styles as predictors of professional achievement, meeting the authors who consider this dimension of burnout as closer to a dispositional variable (Schaufeli & Enzman, 1998).

Finally, the analysis of Beta values suggests that depersonalization is the most complex of the three dimensions of burnout, having as significant predictors all types of variables considered: sociodemographic variables - age (B = 0.10) and sex (B = 0.10); the sources of perceived stress - bad climate (B = 0.40) and inadequate professional training (B = -0.25); the forms of coping by denial and avoidance (B = 0.30); by competition (B = 0.18) and by disorganization (B = -0.26).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The results demonstrate that the social workers have burnout in subscales of emotional exhaustion and personal achievement. We also verify that the work climate influences the motivation of workers in the development of functions.

We confirm that the significant predictors of emotional exhaustion are: perceived stressors - time pressures, ambiguity and role conflict and inadequate professional training; the perceived global stress; and the objective work overload indicator. This study corroborates the importance of a multidimensional conceptualization of burnout to identify different predictors for each of the three dimensions that combine this syndrome.

The analysis suggests that depersonalization is the most complex of the three dimensions of burnout, having as significant predictors all types of variables considered: sociodemographic variables - age and sex; the sources of perceived stress - bad climate and inadequate professional training; the forms of coping by denial and avoidance; by competition and by disorganization.

In view of the above, we consider it necessary to develop an attentive look at the social workers, who in order to take good care of themselves, need safe structures and support from others who meet with them in this context. Finally, we would like to emphasize the contribution of the results found to an understanding, extended to the studied variables, of the impact of professional burnout on the workers' malaise. Thus, it seems to us essential to include in the programs for the prevention / action of burnout, an intervention with the workers, aimed at the promotion of intervention strategies at the level of the studied variables.

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***Corresponding author: Beatriz Farinha**

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