

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>RESEARCH<br/>ARTICLE</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>A case study of burnout among psychologists: Between<br/>Measurement and Discourse</b>                                                                                                 |
| <b>Ghanem Nafissa</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | PhD<br>Abdelhamid Mehri University - Constantine 2, Laboratory of Psychopathology: Physical<br>Violence and Psychological Trauma<br>Algeria<br>Email: nafissa.ghanem@univ-constantine2.dz |
| <b>Doi Serial</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <a href="https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.7.74">https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.7.74</a>                                                                                                     |
| <b>Keywords:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Burnout, psychologist, Maslach Inventory                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Abstract</b><br>This study aims to shed light on the phenomenon of burnout among psychologists by examining two cases through clinical interviews and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The results revealed varying levels of emotional exhaustion and a decline in personal accomplishment among practitioners. Additionally, the psychological and professional factors contributing to the development of this condition were analyzed. This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, while proposing ways to prevent it and provide professional support. |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Citation</b><br>Nafissa Gh. (2025). A case study of burnout among psychologists: Between Measurement and Discourse. <i>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems</i> , 8(7), 729-736; doi:10.56352/sei/8.7.74. <a href="https://imcra-az.org/archive/365-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-7-volviii-2025.html">https://imcra-az.org/archive/365-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-7-volviii-2025.html</a>                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Licensed</b><br>© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Science, Education and Innovations in the context of modern problems (SEI) by IMCRA - International Meetings and Journals Research Association (Azerbaijan). This is an open access article under the <b>CC BY</b> license ( <a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a> ).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Received: 03.01.2025                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Accepted: 10.05.2025      Published: 18.06.2025 (available online)                                                                                                                        |

## 1. Introduction

### Problem Statement:

The contemporary world has experienced an unprecedented acceleration in social, economic and technological change, which has had a direct impact on individuals' daily lives and cast a shadow over various societies. This continuous acceleration has given rise to an increasing number of psychological issues and pressures, to the extent that many researchers have described this era as the 'Age of Psychological Stress'.

In light of this changing and complex reality, mental health has received increasing attention at both the individual and collective levels, particularly since mental health disorders have become one of the most significant challenges facing modern societies due to their profound impact on quality of life and adaptability.

Psychologists play a pivotal role in this context, diagnosing psychological disorders of varying degrees and providing support and guidance to individuals suffering from complex issues ranging from anxiety and depression to deep, chronic psychological disorders.

However, the daily practice of this profession requires deep emotional engagement and constant attention to the suffering of others. This exposes psychologists to accumulated challenges and pressures that may lead to professional burnout. This is characterised by severe emotional, physical and psychological exhaustion resulting from chronic stress in the work environment.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined this phenomenon as ‘a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment, affecting individuals working in professions that require continuous and intensive interaction with others’ (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Kyriacou (1987) also noted that burnout manifests as a range of behavioural symptoms due to ongoing psychological pressures at work. These lead to a gradual depletion of enthusiasm and job satisfaction, as well as increased anxiety and feelings of inadequate recognition for one’s work.

Pines (1988) defined burnout as ‘a mental state affecting professionals who work with others, who give more than they receive from colleagues, friends, and clients’. (Aronson & Pines, 1988).

Given the demands of the psychology profession, which involves working with diverse individuals who each require specific services, treatments, and support, many psychologists may experience feelings of frustration and diminished senses of achievement or success. This can lead to increased psychological pressure and, consequently, burnout.

**Based on the above, we can pose the following questions:**

- To what extent do psychologists experience burnout?
- What psychological and professional factors contribute to burnout among psychologists?
- What are the most common dimensions of burnout among this group?

## **2. Study objectives:**

**Identify the prevalence of burnout among psychologists.**

- Determine the most influential dimensions of the burnout structure among psychologists.
- To analyse the psychological and professional factors associated with the emergence of burnout.

Contribute to developing an awareness framework to help psychologists prevent burnout and enhance their mental health.

## **3. Methodology of the study**

The clinical method is considered very important and fundamental in the field of psychological studies. Therefore, we have chosen to adopt it in our research, as it is highly suitable for our objectives and aligns well with the subject matter and cases studied.

The clinical method involves studying each case individually and providing deep, accurate and continuous observations of specific cases. We adopted a case study approach within the clinical method because it suited the nature of our study topic and involved collecting raw data.

For our study, we used a semi-structured interview technique to investigate burnout among psychologists. This allowed us to delve deeper and verify the development of cases in each interview session. Additionally, we used the Maslach Burnout Inventory, developed by Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson in 1981, to evaluate burnout levels among professionals in human, social and medical services. The inventory consists of 22 items distributed across three dimensions:

- Emotional exhaustion: nine items
- Depersonalisation: 5 items
- Reduced Personal Accomplishment: 8 items

(Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

## **4. Case Studies:**

**The sample was selected purposefully.**

Case One: (N.L.)

Age: 41 years

Profession: Clinical psychologist

Employment: Coordinator in the Surgery Department at Mohamed Boudiaf Hospital, El Khroub for 9 years.

Living standard: average

Family: Mother of two children

**Case Two: (M.B.)**

Age: 34

- Profession: Psychologist

Family: Mother of three children

**5. Results:**

**Summary of Case One:**

N. L., a 41-year-old clinical psychologist, has worked as a coordinator in the Surgery Department at Mohamed Boudiaf Hospital for nine years. She comes from an average background and is a mother of two. Her entry into the field of psychology was a well-deserved challenge. She made significant efforts to achieve her position, dedicating herself to both her clients and to managing tasks among psychologists in different departments.

During interviews, she was understanding and responsive. She stated that, after years of work and especially after becoming a coordinator, her responsibilities had increased, leading to heightened pressures. She reported experiencing severe emotional exhaustion and emotional numbness, and often found herself interacting with her clients in a mechanical way.

We administered the Maslach Burnout Inventory to N. L., explaining the purpose of the scale and allowing her sufficient time to respond thoughtfully.

**Analysis of the interview for case one (N.L.).**

The semi-structured interview revealed that N.L. is experiencing high levels of burnout. Burnout was assessed across four dimensions: physiological, psychological and emotional, cognitive perception, and behavioural.

**1. Physiological dimension:**

Ongoing pressure is affecting N.L.'s physical well-being, manifesting as clear physical symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite (either loss of appetite or overeating) and persistent muscle pain. She stated, "I don't feel like eating, and I feel drained. At night, I toss and turn and can't sleep comfortably." These symptoms result from the continuous stimulation of the nervous system, particularly the sympathetic nervous system, which releases stress hormones such as cortisol when exposed to prolonged stress.

This physiological response can be understood through Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), which outlines the three stages of the stress response: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. N.L. exhibits symptoms of the final stage, where her physical capacities are depleted and she is unable to adapt to daily demands (Selye, 1976).

**2. Psychological and Emotional Dimension:**

N.L. suffers from severe psychological and emotional exhaustion due to her constant involvement in other people's problems at the expense of her own self-care. She said, "Sometimes I neglect myself because I'm so

exhausted; I've neglected myself in many ways." This has led her to develop a defence mechanism characterised by emotional numbness.

Such responses are common among professionals in helping fields such as psychiatry, nursing and education, where initial enthusiasm for the profession can turn into indifference and apathy. Christina Maslach describes this phenomenon in her well-known theory of burnout, which outlines three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment.

In N.L.'s case, the first two dimensions are clearly dominant, indicating an advanced stage of emotional burnout. Additionally, Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory explains that this emotional decline results from N.L.'s unmet basic psychological needs at work, such as feelings of competence and autonomy. When these needs are unmet, individuals lose intrinsic motivation and begin to withdraw emotionally (Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P., 1997).

### **3. Cognitive perception dimension:**

#### **Distorted thoughts and loss of sense of worth.**

N.L. has begun to have negative thoughts about her profession and self-worth, as evidenced by her statements: 'I feel like I'm not useful', 'What we offer isn't up to the required level', and 'Sometimes I feel I can't continue in my role as a clinical psychology coordinator'. These thoughts are examples of cognitive distortions, such as overgeneralisation, catastrophising and downplaying positives, which are common in cognitive therapy and contribute to negative feelings and burnout.

This concept is explained by Aaron Beck's cognitive theory, which posits that an individual's negative interpretation of reality leads to depression and burnout rather than reality itself. We can also reference Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which suggests that a decline in confidence in one's abilities leads to decreased initiative, avoidance of challenging tasks and an increased sense of failure, which aligns with N. L.'s current experience (Beck, A. T., 1976).

### **4. Behavioural Dimension:**

#### **Withdrawal, apathy, and decline in performance:**

There are signs of professional and social withdrawal, such as reduced interaction with colleagues and patients. Behaviourally, N. L. has started to lose initiative and procrastinate over tasks. She resorts to avoidance or absenteeism, or performs tasks mechanically and without engagement. This is reflected in her statement: 'I feel emotionally distant towards my colleagues and clients, and I interact with them far less than I did years ago. I only continue out of duty and responsibility.'

Such behaviours indicate burnout, a concept first described by Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s as a gradual decline in professional commitment. They can also be explained by Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, which states that a person experiences internal tension when there is a contradiction between their beliefs (such as the importance of helping others or interacting with them) and their actual behaviour (withdrawal or numbness). This tension leads to changes in behaviour in order to reduce this inner discomfort (Freudenberger, A. T., 1979).

The results of the Maslach Inventory indicated that N. L. is experiencing high levels of burnout across all three dimensions. The scores obtained for each dimension are as follows:

- Emotional exhaustion: 31 (high).

- Depersonalisation: 02 (high)

Reduced Personal Accomplishment: 35 (moderate).

Thus, N. L. is experiencing significant burnout.

Summary of interviews with case two (M.).

M. is a 34-year-old clinical psychologist who has worked in the emergency department at Didouche Mourad Hospital in Constantine for four years. She has an average standard of living and is a mother of three. She voluntarily entered the field of psychology, and she was understanding and responsive during the interviews. Notably, she mentioned that, after years of work, she has begun to experience job-related pressures. She reported becoming easily irritated and quick to anger, and emphasised her strictness, particularly with regard to her clients.

We administered the Maslach Inventory to M. Prior to this, we explained the scale and its purpose, allowing her sufficient time to respond thoughtfully.

### **Analysis of interviews with case two:**

Through the semi-structured interview, which covered the four dimensions of burnout (physiological, psychological and emotional, cognitive perception and behavioural), we observed the following:

#### **1. Physiological dimension:**

Burnout does not remain confined to the mind; it infiltrates the body. M.'s high emotional exhaustion indicates that her body is in a constant state of alertness. She may experience sleep disturbances, loss of energy, muscle tension and headaches, as reflected in her statement: 'I get very tired and feel drained, and at times I hate the responsibility.' These symptoms are a direct result of what is known as 'psychophysiological fatigue', whereby the body releases excessive amounts of stress hormones such as cortisol, thereby exhausting the nervous and immune systems.

As Hans Selye emphasises, "the body in a state of chronic stress enters the exhaustion phase, where the ability to resist ceases, leading to physical symptoms such as fatigue and sleep disturbances" (Selye, 1976).

#### **2. Psychological and Emotional Dimension:**

Psychological and emotional factors lie at the core of burnout. M. feels emotionally exhausted, as if she is empty inside. Her high score in the reduced personal accomplishment category (44) reflects her loss of confidence in her ability to effect positive change in the lives of others. She articulates this by asking, "Does my work have value?" and "Despite everything I do, I don't feel satisfied." Christina Maslach describes burnout as a deterioration in feelings resulting from working under constant pressure. It starts with emotional exhaustion, followed by depersonalisation and culminates in feelings of worthlessness (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

#### **3. Cognitive perception dimension:**

Burnout can affect cognitive processes and perception. M. has begun to view herself as ineffective, unsuccessful or incapable of achieving professional success. She has adopted negative automatic thought patterns, which are known in cognitive therapy as 'cognitive distortions'. Her score of 44 for reduced personal accomplishment reflects these patterns.

She may have thoughts such as "No one improves despite my efforts" or "My profession drains me without reward", which reinforce feelings of frustration and increase pressure. Aaron Beck states that 'negative automatic thoughts are at the root of burnout, as they lead to internal psychological exhaustion and an increasing sense of worthlessness' (Beck, A. T., 1976).

#### **4. Behavioural Dimension**

Burnout manifests not only in feelings and thoughts, but also in behaviour. M. may start to avoid tasks, postpone sessions, reduce social interaction or perform her work in a routine, passionless way. This is evident in her statement: 'I lost the enthusiasm for my service that I had in the beginning.' She may also show signs of fatigue or a lack of motivation during sessions.

This behavioural change is the result of diminished intrinsic motivation and reflects a natural response to a declining sense of self-worth. According to Bandura (1997), "when the sense of self-efficacy weakens, individuals

begin to reduce their participation and interaction, increasing their tendency to withdraw or experience behavioural failure”.

After M. responded to the Maslach Inventory, we found that she experienced high emotional exhaustion (score of 42), moderate depersonalisation (score of 11), and high reduced personal accomplishment (score of 44). Thus, M. is suffering from ‘high burnout’.

## **6. General Discussion:**

The results of the interviews and the Maslach Inventory for the two cases studied demonstrate that burnout is not a trivial or superficial phenomenon, but rather a complex, multidimensional condition affecting psychologists at physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural levels. This is evident from the analysis of scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment.

### **First: Emotional Exhaustion and Associated Physical and Emotional Symptoms**

Case M.B. recorded a very high emotional exhaustion score of 42, while Case N.L. scored 31, reflecting acute psychological depletion. M.B. expressed her struggles, stating: ‘I explode over the slightest thing... the pressure is unbearable,’ translating into emotional symptoms such as irritability, sudden sadness, and intense tension. She also reported physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue and sleep disturbances. This aligns with the classification by Graiguel-Schuler (1982) which states that burnout initially manifests as physical symptoms alongside chronic fatigue.

This highlights the importance of Christina Maslach’s (1982) assertion that ‘burnout begins with emotional exhaustion, forming a foundation for depersonalisation, and then an absence of a sense of accomplishment’. This dimension is a critical starting point for professional and emotional collapse.

### **Secondly, depersonalisation and associated cognitive and behavioural symptoms.**

Despite the close scores between the two cases (12 for N.L. and 11 for M.B.), their expressions differed significantly. N.L. exhibited calmness and emotional detachment, which Maslach (1982) describes as defensive emotional numbness. In contrast, M.B. expressed anxious tension and sharp reactions, reflecting different responses to work pressure influenced by the nature and conditions of their respective departments.

Cognitive symptoms such as difficulty concentrating and making decisions emerged, particularly in the case of N.L., who stated, ‘I feel like I’m working mechanically... without awareness’, indicating a decline in mental performance. Behavioural symptoms included social withdrawal and loss of motivation, as described by Beck (1983) and Craiguel-Schuler (1982), who considered these changes to be direct consequences of accumulated psychological stress in the work environment.

### **Thirdly, there was reduced personal accomplishment and professional recognition.**

This dimension was particularly evident in M.B. (44), who despite her continuous efforts, expressed feelings of undervaluation. In contrast, N.L.’s score was moderate (35), despite her acknowledgement of her professional success. These findings align with the Job Demands-Resources Model (Demerouti et al., 2001), which suggests that high professional demands lead to a depletion of the sense of accomplishment, particularly when supportive resources such as recognition, appreciation, or organisational support are lacking.

### **Fourth: Individual Differences and Contextual Impact**

Considering their professional backgrounds, N.L. has worked as a coordinator for nine years, while M.B. has worked in a more demanding environment for four years. These differences in context lead to different manifestations of burnout, although they are similar in essence. This is consistent with Herbert Freudenberger’s (1974) observations on burnout in helping professions, which state that ‘burnout is more prevalent among individuals with high professional commitment’, where dedication becomes a burden in the absence of support or recognition.

### **Fifth: professional interaction and silent suffering.**

Despite their academic training and awareness of the seriousness of burnout, the results suggest that psychologists may neglect their own psychological well-being for the sake of their profession. This is consistent with Carl Rogers' (1961) view that 'a therapist cannot give to others what they do not possess themselves'. Therefore, professional giving requires balance in personal psychological health.

#### **Sixth: Towards Professional Psychological Prevention**

To achieve the fourth objective of the study, the following key recommendations are proposed for a preventive programme:

- Organise psychological debriefing sessions every six months to reduce emotional accumulation.

Provide safe professional spaces for psychological support.

- Train psychologists in self-awareness strategies and stress prevention.

- Foster a culture of recognition and appreciation within work teams.

- Integrate psychological follow-up as part of institutional dynamics.

From our observations during the interviews, it is evident that both N.L. and M.B. are experiencing burnout, albeit in different ways. N.L. appeared to be internally exhausted, working quietly and silently, with fatigue evident in her features and expressions. In contrast, M.B.'s exhaustion manifested itself more explosively, with quick irritability, as if she had reached her limit. Although they experience similar pressures, they react to stress differently.

These results emphasise that, despite their knowledge and experience, psychologists remain human and are susceptible to exhaustion, particularly in the absence of appreciation and support. They demonstrate that burnout encompasses not only fatigue, but also the slow erosion of feelings, motivation and self-worth. This emphasises the importance of psychological rest and continuous support for professionals, as they cannot effectively help others while feeling burdened themselves.

#### **Conclusion:**

This study addressed the significant issue of burnout among psychologists, one of the most emotionally affected groups due to the nature of their work involving listening to and supporting others through psychological suffering. The results revealed varying levels of burnout, manifested as emotional exhaustion, emotional numbness and a low sense of accomplishment. This reflects the accumulated pressures faced by professionals in the absence of effective support mechanisms within institutions.

Our findings emphasise the importance of recognising the challenges faced by psychologists in their role as caregivers and improving the quality of professional life for this group. This is essential for safeguarding their mental health and ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of their therapeutic interventions. It is therefore crucial to schedule regular psychological and professional debriefing sessions supervised by specialised teams to facilitate experience sharing, emotional release and collective support.

Furthermore, we emphasise the importance of promoting a culture of self-care among psychologists through regular training workshops and the implementation of preventive psychological follow-up mechanisms within institutions. Supporting field research on the mental health of caregivers is also crucial for developing effective prevention and early intervention strategies.

Preventing burnout is an urgent necessity, not a luxury, to ensure a balanced and humane therapeutic environment.

#### **References:**

1. Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.
2. Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*. International Universities Press.

3. Demerouti, E., Baker, A., Nachreiner, F. & Schaufeli, W. (2001). 'Job demands-resources model of burnout'. Journal of Applied Psychology <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010>.
4. Freudenberg, H. (1974). Burnout: The Cost of Caring. Bantam Books, First Edition.
5. Graiguel-Schuler, G. (1982). Burnout: Professional Exhaustion of Caregivers. Paris: University Editions.
6. Kyriacou, C. (1987). Teacher Stress and Burnout: An international review. Educational Research.
7. Maslach, C. and Jackson, S. E. (1981). 'The measurement of experienced burnout'. Journal of Occupational Behavior.
8. Maslach, C. and Leiter, M. P. (1997). The Truth About Burnout. Jossey-Bass.
9. Pines, A. and Aronson, E. (1988). Career Burnout: Causes and Cures. Free Press.
10. Rogers, C. R. (1961). On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy. Houghton Mifflin.
11. Selye, H. (1976). The Stress of Life. McGraw-Hill.