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Consequences of parental burnout: Its specific effect on child neglect and violence

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ABSTRACT

Parental burnout is a specific syndrome resulting from enduring exposure to chronic parenting stress. It encompasses three dimensions: an overwhelming exhaustion related to one's parental role, an emotional distancing from one's children and a sense of ineffectiveness in one's parental role. This study aims to facilitate further identification of the consequences of parental burnout for the parents themselves, their spouses and their child(ren). In a sample of 1551 parents, we examined the relationship between parental burnout and seven possible consequences: escapism and suicidal thoughts, addictions, sleep disorders, marital conflicts, a partner estrangement mindset, and neglect and violence towards one's child(ren). We examined (1) to what extent parental and job burnout related to each of these possible consequences and (2) whether parental burnout is specifically related to neglectful and violent behaviour towards one's child(ren). The results suggest that parental burnout has a statistically similar effect to job burnout on addictions and sleep problems, a stronger effect on couples' conflicts and partner estrangement mindset and a specific effect on child-related outcomes (neglect and violence) and escape and suicidal ideation. These results emphasize the importance of accurately diagnosing this syndrome.

1. Introduction

Parenting has been shown to be a both complex and stressful job (for reviews, see [Abidin & Abidin, 1990](#); [Crnic & Low, 2002](#); [Deater-Deckard, 2008](#)), to the point that parents sometimes feel that they lack energy for parenting ([Janisse, Barnett, & Nies, 2009](#)). As a matter of fact, it has recently been shown that, just as enduring exposure to excessive job stress can lead to *job* burnout, enduring exposure to overwhelming parenting stress can lead to *parental* burnout ([Lindström, Aman, & Norberg, 2011](#); [Norberg, 2007](#); [Norberg, 2010](#); [Norberg, Mellgren, Winiarski, & Forinder, 2014](#)). Like job burnout, parental burnout encompasses three dimensions. The first is overwhelming exhaustion related to one's parental role: parents feel that being a parent requires too much involvement; they feel tired when getting up in the morning and having to face another day with their children; they feel emotionally drained by the parental role to the extent that thinking about their role as parents makes them feel they have reached the end of their tether. The second dimension is an emotional distancing from their children: exhausted parents become less and less involved in parenting and in the relationship with their children; they do the bare minimum for the children but no more; interactions are limited to functional/instrumental aspects at the expense of emotional aspects. The third dimension is a sense of ineffectiveness in the parental role: parents feel that they cannot handle problems calmly and/or effectively.

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Parental burnout is a unique and context-specific syndrome, related to yet empirically distinct from depression, job burnout, and parental stress (Roskam, Raes, & Mikolajczak, 2017). Just as job stress does not always lead to job burnout, parental stress does not always lead to parental burnout. Both employees and parents can bear a lot of stress if they have enough resources to compensate for the effect of stress. As has been shown in the organizational domain, job burnout develops when demands are high and resources are limited (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). We have recently shown that the same applies in the parenting domain: parental burnout occurs when risks (demands) are not compensated by enough resources (Mikolajczak & Roskam, *in press*). The conceptual difference between parental stress and parental burnout is also evident in the instruments used to measure both concepts: none of the instruments used to measure parental stress include the core dimensions of parental burnout, namely exhaustion and emotional distancing from the children. Note that the difference between stress and burnout is not only conceptual: research in the organizational domain has shown that they translate into different physiological correlates (e.g., Pruessner, Hellhammer, & Kirschbaum, 1999) and that job burnout has more damaging consequences on the individual and the organization than job stress (e.g., Pines & Keinan, 2005).

The consequences of parental burnout have not been investigated so far and the specificity of its consequences relative to job burnout is unknown. The aim of this paper is to explore these questions. The variables envisaged in this study as possible consequences of parental burnout were chosen if they met one of the following three criteria: (1) they are documented consequences of parenting stress; (2) they are documented consequences of job burnout and the reasons why they are related to job burnout could apply to parental burnout (e.g., job burnout has been shown to increase alcohol use as a means of diffusing the tension accumulated during the day; this reasoning could apply to parental burnout too); (3) they are frequently reported in burnt-out parents' testimonies. Based on the criteria reported above, we hypothesized that parental burnout would have the following detrimental consequences on the parent, the couple and the children.

1.1. Consequences on the parent

The vast majority of burnt-out parents that we have met in the framework of our qualitative studies or consultations have reported escape ideation taking the form of either suicidal thoughts or the desire to leave without leaving any address. This is not so surprising, as the literature on job burnout also shows a moderate relationship between burnout and suicidal thoughts (e.g., Olkinuora et al., 1990; van der Heijden, Dillingh, Bakker, & Prins, 2008). However, we expected to find an even stronger link with parental burnout because there is a crucial difference between professional and parenting roles: the employee who is in burnout or about to burn out can resign and, in fact, many burnout workers think of leaving their company (e.g., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; see Alarcon, 2011 for a meta-analysis) or even their profession (Jourdain & Chênevert, 2010). If leaving is not an option and if work becomes a source of exhaustion to the point of damaging the body, the employee may be placed on sick leave. None of this is possible for parents: one cannot resign from one's parenting role and one cannot be put on sick leave from one's children. This may be what leads parents in parental burnout to consider extreme solutions to run away from their parenthood, such as suicide or flight.

Suicide and flight are both forms of physical escape. But there are also psychological ways to escape from a situation perceived as unbearable. In a community study, Deleuze et al. (2015) showed that smoking, drinking alcohol, shopping, exercising, binge eating, telephoning, working, spending time on social networks and the Internet are all frequent means used by ordinary people in order to distract themselves from and regulate unpleasant moods. About a third of their sample tended to regulate their mood through excessive involvement in one or more of these behaviors. Although these subjects were not characterized by an addictive behavior pattern per se, the authors point out that people who consume these substances or engage in these distractive behaviors in order to escape from uncomfortable feelings or experiences are vulnerable to developing addictions to these substances/behaviors if stress/negative emotions intensify or persist. Because burnout is the result of enduring and excessive stress, we hypothesized that both job and parental burnout would be related to greater risk of addiction to the above-mentioned behaviors. Research conducted on job burnout has already shown that it has dramatic effects on alcohol use, increasing the risk of alcohol dependence by up to 80% (Ahola et al., 2006).

A last consequence for parents investigated here concerns sleep. Almost all of the burnt-out parents we have met and interviewed reported sleep disorders. This is not surprising: multiple studies have demonstrated a two-way, circular link between stress spectrum disorders (including burnout) and sleep: on the one hand, lack of sleep reduces the resources needed to manage stress (see Palmer & Alfano, 2017 for review), and on the other hand, stress decreases the amount and quality of sleep (Åkerstedt, 2006). The testimonies of parents in burnout on their poor quality of sleep are perfectly congruent with the studies carried out in the field of job burnout. These studies show that people in burnout have significant disturbances in the quality and nature of sleep: they take longer to fall asleep, spend more time in the stages of light sleep, and less time in slow-wave and REM sleep; they also have more fragmented sleep with more micro-arousals and nocturnal awakenings (Ekstedt, Söderström, & Åkerstedt, 2009). These objective disturbances probably explain why people in burnout report feeling as tired on waking as control people do before going to bed (Ekstedt et al., 2009). Prospective studies support the idea of a vicious circle: sleep deprivation is a risk factor for burnout (Söderström, Jeding, Ekstedt, Perski, & Åkerstedt, 2012) and burnout is a risk factor for sleep disorders (Armon, Shirom, Shapira, & Melamed, 2008). The perturbations mentioned above normalize with the recovery of burnout (Ekstedt et al., 2009). Because of the importance people attach to their parental role, we expected that the association between parental burnout and sleep would be on average of the same magnitude as that between job burnout and sleep.

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