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Abstract

Burnout has emerged as one of the most pressing threats to the sustainability of non-profit organisations. While widely studied in occupational health psychology, burnout manifests uniquely within mission-driven work, where moral duty, chronic resource scarcity, and emotional labour converge. This article conceptualises burnout in the non-profit sector through an interdisciplinary lens. Drawing on the Maslach Burnout Framework, Job Demands–Resources theory, and the Conservation of Resources model, it examines how burnout reflects the chronic imbalance between demands and resources in humanitarian, advocacy, and service-oriented organisations. The article also distinguishes burnout from related constructs such as stress, compassion fatigue, and moral injury, clarifying their overlaps and differences. Insights from sociology emphasise the role of emotional labour in exacerbating vulnerability, while resilience theory highlights protective factors at both individual and organisational levels. By framing burnout as a systemic and structural phenomenon rather than an individual weakness, this article underscores the need for comprehensive prevention strategies that integrate governance reforms, psychosocial support, and resilience-building practices.

Keywords

burnout; non-profit sector; emotional labour; job demands–resources; resilience; occupational health psychology

1. Introduction

Burnout represents a chronic and multifaceted condition that directly undermines the health of individuals and the resilience of organisations. Within the non-profit sector, it weakens staff motivation, reduces volunteer retention, and compromises mission effectiveness. While the term has been widely researched in psychology and health sciences, the distinctive context of non-profit organisations—characterised by donor dependency, resource scarcity, and moral obligations—demands a tailored conceptualisation. This article explores the key frameworks and related constructs that define burnout in non-profits, situating it as both a psychological and organisational challenge.

2. Core Frameworks for Understanding Burnout

2.1 The Maslach Burnout Framework

Christina Maslach and colleagues defined burnout as a syndrome of **emotional exhaustion**, **depersonalisation**, and **reduced personal accomplishment** (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) remains the dominant tool for measurement and has been applied across professions requiring interpersonal intensity, including teaching, healthcare, and social services. In non-profits, emotional exhaustion often arises from prolonged engagement with inequality and crises, depersonalisation emerges as emotional distancing from beneficiaries, and reduced accomplishment reflects frustration over scarce resources and limited impact.

2.2 Job Demands–Resources Theory

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model highlights how burnout develops when workplace demands outweigh available resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Within NGOs, excessive donor reporting requirements, unstable funding cycles, and limited supervisory support create chronic demand–resource gaps that drive exhaustion and disengagement.

2.3 Conservation of Resources Theory

Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory adds a resource-based perspective, viewing burnout as a cumulative process of depletion (Hobfoll, 1989). Non-profit workers may lose not only financial and material resources but also social recognition, confidence, and emotional energy. When such losses cannot be replenished, exhaustion becomes entrenched.

3. Related and Overlapping Constructs

Burnout intersects with but remains distinct from other phenomena.

- **Stress** is acute and situational, while burnout reflects chronic depletion.
- **Compassion fatigue**, common in humanitarian contexts, highlights the cost of sustained empathic engagement but differs in its focus on secondary trauma.
- **Moral injury** arises when individuals are forced to act against their values, particularly in contexts of systemic injustice.

Clarifying these distinctions is essential for accurate diagnosis and effective intervention in non-profits.

4. Sociological and Psychological Extensions

Hochschild's (1983) concept of **emotional labour** illuminates how non-profit staff must continuously display compassion and resilience, even when personally exhausted. This hidden labour, while essential for maintaining donor confidence and organisational legitimacy, intensifies vulnerability to burnout.

In contrast, **resilience theory** underscores protective factors such as social networks, adaptive leadership, and supportive organisational culture. Occupational health psychology integrates these perspectives, demonstrating that prevention depends not only on individual coping skills but also on systemic design, fair resource allocation, and sustainable leadership practices.

5. Illustrative Cases

- **Donor reporting stress:** NGO staff in Europe report exhaustion linked to bureaucratic reporting requirements that shift focus away from mission work.
- **Volunteer depersonalisation:** Humanitarian volunteers in crisis contexts often distance themselves emotionally as a coping strategy, leading to cynicism.
- **Protective cultures:** Community-based organisations with strong peer support and recognition systems show significantly lower rates of burnout among staff and volunteers.

These cases illustrate how both systemic pressures and organisational cultures shape the prevalence and severity of burnout.

6. Discussion

The conceptualisation of burnout in non-profits reveals it to be a **structural outcome** rather than an individual failing. Frameworks such as MBI, JD-R, and COR highlight the interplay of demands, resources, and chronic depletion, while sociology draws attention to emotional labour as a hidden burden. Distinguishing burnout from related conditions such as stress and compassion fatigue prevents conceptual confusion and guides more targeted responses. Importantly, resilience theory shows that protective factors can be cultivated, but they require organisational commitment and structural reform, not just personal effort.

7. Conclusion

Burnout in the non-profit sector is best understood as a chronic, multidimensional condition shaped by systemic imbalances, emotional labour, and resource depletion. While individual coping strategies remain relevant, they are insufficient without broader organisational and structural reforms. By integrating psychological, sociological, and management

perspectives, this article demonstrates that burnout prevention is a matter of institutional design and strategic governance. For academics, these insights contribute to clearer conceptual distinctions; for practitioners, they highlight the urgent need to embed resilience practices into the very fabric of organisational management.

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