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Measuring Burnout and Well-Being in the Non-Profit Sector

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Abstract

Accurate measurement of burnout and well-being in the non-profit sector is essential for both scholarly understanding and practical intervention. Standardised tools such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), and Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) provide valuable benchmarks but face limitations, including cultural bias and reliance on self-reporting. Organisational climate and engagement surveys offer systemic insights into leadership, recognition, and fairness, while qualitative methods —such as interviews, journaling, and ethnography—capture the lived realities of staff and volunteers. Increasingly, mixed-methods approaches are recommended, as they combine the generalisability of quantitative surveys with the contextual richness of qualitative evidence. However, measurement also carries risks: over-surveying can lead to cynicism, and numerical indicators may obscure relational dimensions of well-being. This article argues that measurement must be embedded within organisational learning and linked to visible change. When responsibly applied, measurement can identify risks, strengthen resilience, and inform strategy. Misapplied, it risks reinforcing the very conditions that generate burnout.

Keywords

burnout measurement; well-being; Maslach Burnout Inventory; engagement surveys; qualitative research; mixed-methods

1. Introduction

Burnout and well-being in non-profit organisations are complex phenomena shaped by individual, organisational, and systemic conditions. Their assessment requires robust tools capable of capturing both psychological states and organisational dynamics. This article examines traditional and emerging approaches to measuring burnout and well-being in non-profits, highlighting the strengths, limitations, and implications of different methodologies.

2. Standardised Instruments

2.1 Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

The **MBI** remains the most widely used measure of burnout, capturing emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Its strength lies in comparability across sectors and contexts. However, critics argue it reflects primarily Western understandings of work and may under-represent cultural variations in how exhaustion is expressed (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

2.2 Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI)

The **CBI** addresses this gap by distinguishing between personal, work-related, and client-related burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005). This differentiation is especially valuable for non-profits where stress may originate in direct service to beneficiaries as much as in organisational roles.

2.3 Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)

The **ProQOL** extends measurement beyond burnout to include **secondary traumatic stress**, making it highly relevant for humanitarian, caregiving, and advocacy organisations (Stamm, 2010).

Using these instruments in combination can yield a more nuanced picture of well-being in non-profit environments.

3. Organisational Surveys

While individual-level measures are important, burnout must also be assessed in relation to organisational dynamics. **Climate and engagement surveys** capture leadership support, role clarity, fairness, team cohesion, and recognition. Findings often reveal systemic vulnerabilities—such as high turnover or weak supervision—that remain invisible through individual assessments alone. At the same time, engagement surveys highlight positive protective factors such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment, which buffer against burnout.

4. Qualitative Approaches

Quantitative surveys benefit from scale but often lack contextual depth. **Qualitative methods**—including in-depth interviews, reflective journaling, and ethnography—offer insight into the lived experiences of staff and volunteers.

- **Ethnography** highlights how burnout manifests differently in resource-scarce humanitarian contexts compared to professionalised NGOs in the Global North.
- **Reflective journaling** functions both as a research method and as an organisational practice, helping individuals recognise stressors early and cultivate self-awareness.

These approaches foreground the human and relational dimensions of burnout often missed by surveys.

5. Mixed-Methods Designs

Mixed-methods designs combine the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insight. For example, surveys may reveal high exhaustion among volunteers, while follow-up interviews identify managerial practices that exacerbate stress. Such triangulation validates findings and helps organisations design targeted interventions. For non-profits, where burnout arises from the interaction of mission, identity, and resource scarcity, mixed-methods approaches are particularly effective.

6. Challenges and Risks of Measurement

Measurement itself carries risks.

- **Self-report surveys** are subject to bias and cultural variation.
- **Over-measurement** can create fatigue and cynicism, particularly if results do not lead to change.
- **Reductionism** occurs when well-being is reduced to numbers, obscuring its relational and cultural dimensions.

Measurement must therefore be integrated into organisational processes—such as supervision, performance reviews, and strategic planning—in ways that encourage reflection and dialogue.

7. Discussion

A comprehensive approach to measuring burnout in non-profits requires integrating standardised instruments, organisational surveys, and qualitative tools. While MBI, CBI, and ProQOL remain useful, they are most effective when combined with context-sensitive methods. Mixed-methods designs are particularly well-suited for capturing the complex interplay of mission-driven work, emotional labour, and resource scarcity. Ultimately, measurement should not be an end in itself but a catalyst for learning and change.

8. Conclusion

Measuring burnout and well-being in non-profits is both a technical and ethical challenge. No single instrument can capture the complexity of experiences across diverse contexts. Integrated approaches—combining quantitative rigour with qualitative depth—offer the most promising path forward. Crucially, measurement must be tied to organisational action; otherwise, it risks eroding trust and reinforcing the very conditions that foster burnout. Used

responsibly, however, it enables organisations to identify risks, strengthen resilience, and align internal practices with their missions of care and justice.

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