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Beyond Job Burnout: Parental Burnout!

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Abstract

This article lifts the veil on an existing but long taboo phenomenon: Parental burnout (PB), an exhaustion syndrome related to the parenting role. PB is caused by a perceived gap between parenting resources and demands, and it has a host of serious consequences for parents and their children.

Keywords: Parent, exhaustion, stress, resources, demands, review.

Beyond Job Burnout: Parental Burnout!

Parenthood can usher in the best of times. It can also usher in the worst of times. Parenting can be a life-affirming and deeply enjoyable experience, but it can also be a life-denying and deeply frustrating experience. When parents chronically face parenting stressors without the resources needed to handle them, they may develop parental burnout (PB). The parallels between the above and the experience of work is obvious: work can be both gratifying and stressful, and can also lead to burnout. Interestingly, however, although humans have both parented and worked since the dawn of time, there have been thousands of publications on job burnout and less than fifty on parental burnout. One explanation for this huge asymmetry is that people in power in science (historically men) have set the agenda, and work has traditionally been the domain of men and parenting the domain of women. This article aims to draw the attention to a problem that needs urgent attention and that affects millions of parents around the world (and not just women!): Parental burnout [1].

What is Parental Burnout?

While parenting stress is perfectly normal, PB occurs when there is a lasting mismatch between perceived stressors and resources in the parenting domain [2]. The subjective phenomenology of PB is the result of this chronic and overwhelming stress, which leads parents to feel exhausted and run down by their parenting role. If you are experiencing parental burnout, merely thinking about what you have to do with or for your children makes you feel as though you've reached the end of your tether. Over time, this leads you to detach yourself from your children and start acting on autopilot. You are "in survival mode." Outside the usual basic routines (lifts in the car, bedtime, meals), you are no longer able to invest in the relationship with your child(ren). You don't enjoy being with your children anymore and your lack of fulfillment in parenting is such that, sometimes, you can't stand your role as

parent anymore. In the end, you don't recognize yourself as the parent you used and wanted to be [3].

Of course, most parents occasionally experience these symptoms. But parental burnout is not ordinary transient parenting stress. It is chronic overwhelming stress. This is not only evident at the psychological level but also in parents' bodies, where it is possible to trace the level of stress that an individual has experienced over the last three months. Specifically, we found that the level of hair cortisol in parents seeking treatment for parental burnout is twice as high as that of demographically matched control parents [4]. This relation seems to be causal because psychological treatment for parental burnout brings cortisol values back to normal [5]. The fact that the hair cortisol of parents in burnout is even higher than patients suffering from severe chronic pain [6] is a testament to the intense suffering experienced by these parents.

What Leads to Parental Burnout?

How can a parent become so tired of parenting? Counterintuitively, socio-demographic factors do not strongly predict PB. For example, although being a woman, having a large family, having young children at home, and being a stay-at-home parent do increase the risk of PB, taken together, socio-demographic factors explain little variance in PB [2]. As shown in Figure 1, the strongest predictors of PB are related to (1) the psychological characteristics of parents (e.g., being perfectionist [e. g., 7] or lacking emotion and stress management abilities [8, 9]), (2) the characteristics of their children (e.g., children lacking conscientiousness [8] or children with special needs [10]), (3) their child rearing practices (e.g., being inconsistent [9]), (4) the quality the relationship with the coparent (e.g., being unsupported, not recognized, or denigrated by the other parent [9, 11]), (5) the level of extra-familial support (e.g., lacking support from extended family or friends [10]), (6) the way

family life is organized (e.g., lacking routines or orderliness [9]), and the time available for leisure activities (e.g., lacking time for replenishing activities that allow to parents to take a break [9, 11]) [see 2 for a review of risk and protective factors for parental burnout and their respective weights].

As the foregoing suggests, PB not only depends on the stressors that weigh on the parent but also on the perceived resources. Most parents have a number of risk factors (i.e., factors that increase parenting stress), but they also have a number of resources (i.e., factors that decrease parenting stress). For instance, Mary may be a perfectionist stay-at-home mother struggling with a young child with learning difficulties and a difficult adolescent, but she benefits from the support of her husband and her mother, and she has a hobby – painting – that helps her breathe out and take distance from parenting. It is when the balance between perceived risks and resources chronically leans to the wrong side that PB occurs [2].

Why Does Parental Burnout Matter?

Some parents are exhausted. Big news. (Why) should we worry? What makes PB worrying is the combination of its relatively high prevalence and the seriousness of its consequences (see Figure 1). At present, 5% of parents, a number that can rise to 9% in Western Countries, are suffering from parental burnout (International Investigation of Parental Burnout [12]). In the US, the prevalence rate is 8%, which means that more than 5.5 million parents likely have PB.

Parents in burnout are at risk for a host of negative consequences that affect not only themselves but also their children. As regards the parents themselves, PB can give rise to severe suicidal and escape ideations [1], which are actually much more frequent in PB than in job burnout or even depression [13]. This finding is not surprising considering that one cannot resign from one's parenting role nor be put on sick leave from one's children. PB also seems

to dysregulate the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis [4, 5] which may help explain the somatic complaints and sleep disorders reported by burned out parents [13]. In addition to affecting the parents, PB can have serious repercussions for children. It strongly and linearly increases both parental violence and parental neglect [1]. All these effects are causal: When PB is treated via a targeted psychological intervention, parental violence and neglect decrease in a manner proportional to the decrease in PB, and HPA axis activity normalizes [5].

What Can Be Done to Reduce Parental Burnout?

PB leads to significant suffering for both parents and children, and given the life-long repercussions of parental distress and child neglect/maltreatment [14], there is an urgent need for steps to prevent and treat PB. The fact that PB results from a perceived mismatch between stressors and resources suggests that there may be two intervention avenues at both societal and individual levels: (1) create a society with fewer stressors (e.g., less pressure on parents), (2) provide parents with more external resources (e.g., greater supports from the state and the community), (3) change individuals' perceptions to decrease perceived stress, and (4) build individual's internal resources to cope with parenting stress. Reducing parental burnout is thus a collective and individual responsibility.

The huge variation in levels of PB across the world (some countries have a prevalence ten times greater than others) suggests that intervening at the societal level (the two first avenues) may be an efficient means to reduce PB. Interestingly, PB is much less common in Africa, where the average number of children in some countries is 7 (but where a whole village participates in childcare) than in Western countries, where the average number of children is inferior to 2 (but where parents often run frantically from one extracurricular activity to another, seeking to "optimize" the development of their two children) [12]. Although explanatory factors of these differences in prevalence have yet to be studied, it is

possible that the Western demand for parenting perfection (fostered by individualism and performance values, state recommendations, and social comparison on social networks) has become particularly toxic.

Knowing that societal changes are often difficult and slow, it will likely be necessary to also intervene at the individual level (the third and fourth avenues). One framework for conceptualizing individual-level interventions to decrease stress is the process model of emotion regulation [15] which opens several perspectives to both reduce parenting stressors and/or build internal resources to cope with them. As applied to PB, this framework suggests interventions at several complementary levels. For example, parents could be taught to better select the situations to which they expose themselves (e.g., decrease children's extracurricular activities), change situations so as to alleviate the associated burden (e.g., share rides with other parents), modify their attention (e.g., pay less attention to clutter in the rooms), reappraise difficult situations in a more positive way (e.g. reappraise difficult behaviors as a sign of child's fatigue instead of provocation), or attenuate their physiological activation (taking times to relax and breathe out of parenting stress). As confidence in their use of these strategies grows, parents may come to feel more certain that they possess the resources needed to manage the parenting stressors they face, tipping the balance away from PB.

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Box 1. The Cognitive Science of Parental Burnout (PB)

There is a critical dearth of cognitive studies in the field of PB. This is regrettable because there are good reasons to believe that cognitive processes (e.g., executive functions, attentional, appraisal or memory processes) are involved in the onset or maintenance of PB. First, the fact that sociodemographic factors (e.g., number and age of children, single parenthood) weigh so little in predicting PB suggests that cognitive factors might be operative. Second, cognitive processes are known to play a crucial role in most psychological conditions. Here too, cognitive processes could moderate or mediate the impact of sociodemographic and situational stressors on PB. For instance, the impact of a child's difficult behaviors on PB might be stronger if the parent pays more attention to these behaviors (moderation), and the appraisal of these behaviors might be more negative if the parent receives no help from one's spouse (mediation). Besides their role between objective circumstances and PB, cognitive processes may also moderate the impact of PB on its possible consequences (e.g., parents' level of inhibitory control could moderate the link between PB and parental violence). As these few examples show, there is much to do at the intersection of cognitive science and parental burnout.

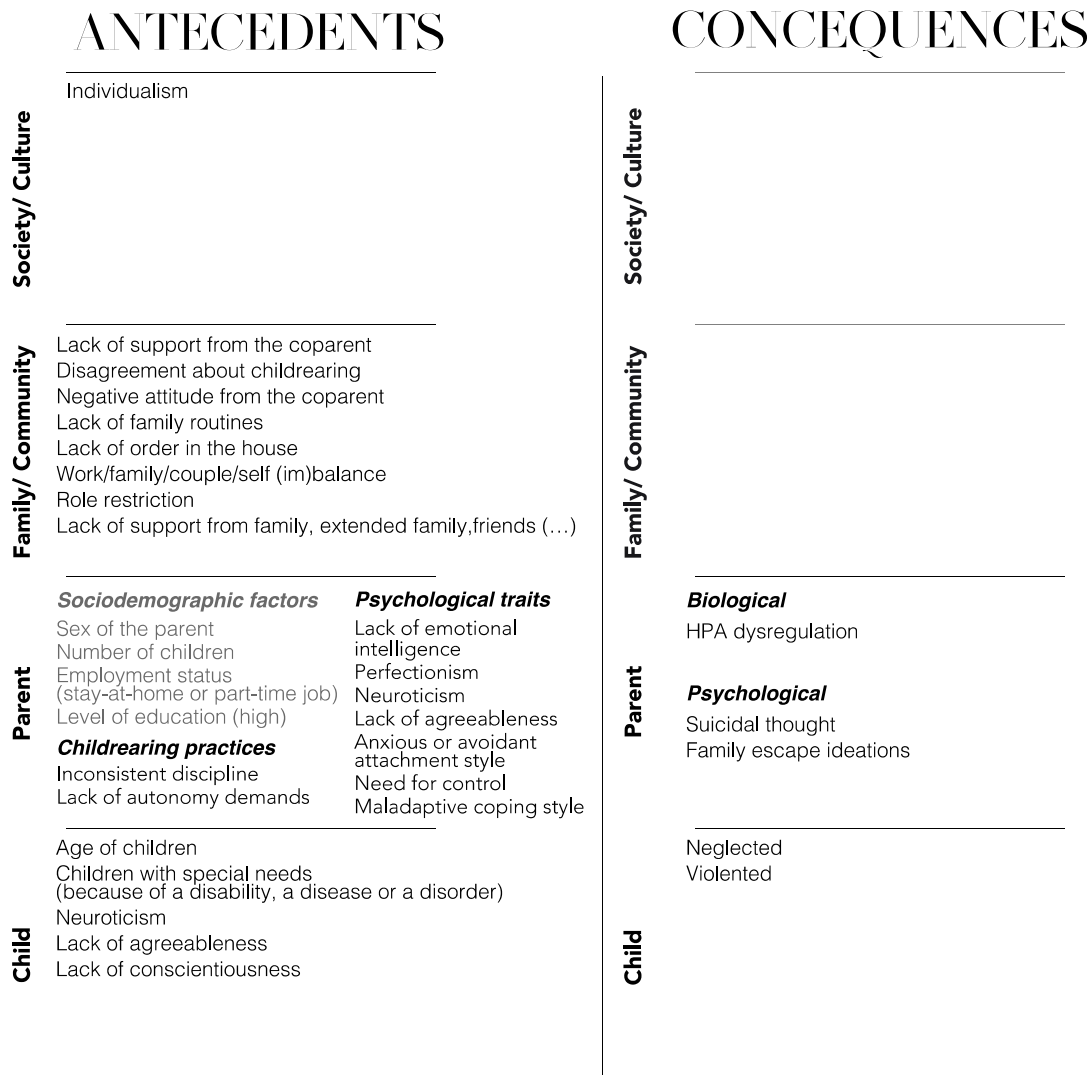


Figure 1 Antecedents and Consequences of Parental Burnout.

Sociodemographic factors are in lighter grey because their predictive power of parental burnout is significantly lower than the other categories of factors. In the “Consequences”, we have listed only the variables that have been shown to be consequences (and not only correlates) of parental burnout. Empty boxes await investigation.