

Psychological Determinants of Burnout Among University Professors in Light of Current Academic Transformations

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Reception :24.04.2025. Acceptance : 12.10.2025. Publication: 20.11.2025

Abstract

Like most areas of life, higher education is currently witnessing rapid and profound technological transformations, including widespread digitalization, accelerated requirements for scientific publishing, and intensified teaching and administrative burdens. All these changes combined may affect mental health and cause stress and psychological pressure, potentially leading to increased levels of burnout among

university professors. This article reviews the main psychological determinants that contribute to the emergence of burnout in the modern academic context, analyzing the nature of each determinant's effect in light of the current university environment. The article also offers an interpretive framework for the interaction of these determinants and proposes preventive measures to avoid this disorder

Problematic Introduction

Today, we are experiencing rapid academic and technological transformations, as in all areas of life, due to global developments at all levels. Higher education is not immune to these influences, as it is one of the most important institutions that confronts and keeps pace with modernization at all levels, along with all its human resources and administrative structures. These transformations include the expansion of administrative roles, pedagogical and scientific tasks through updating and accelerating scientific publication, high-quality systems, and hybrid teaching introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic. All these changes make the university professor—the fundamental pillar of higher education and a key actor in achieving educational objectives—exposed to stress factors affecting individual health, particularly mental health. This profession is characterized by heavy responsibilities

and duties compared to other social professions. Godet notes that teaching is among the five most stressful professions. According to the report on work stress in England, teaching ranks first, followed by nursing as the most stressful profession, especially when the necessary conditions for performing the job are lacking (Mehdi Belasla, 2010, p. 320).

Professors face difficult challenges under all these changes compared to the tasks required of them, which may affect their mental health and subject them to increasing stress in order to keep up with events and adapt at a pace that may exceed their resources and personal capabilities. This can lead to poor mental health, resulting in severe consequences such as physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, feelings of fatigue and alienation, indifference, neglect of self-care, and diminished attention to work and daily responsibilities. These struggles may lead to

health problems, sometimes severe, and may result in what scientists now call **burnout**, one of the most significant professional and mental health challenges in universities worldwide.

A study by Al-Rashdan and Muqable Nasr (1995) on burnout among faculty members at Jordanian public universities indicated that faculty members exhibited varying degrees of burnout related to academic rank and faculty affiliation (Al-Rashdan & Muqable, 1995). Similarly, field studies by Khadija Mellal and Malika Mehrez on burnout among university professors using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-ES) found that professors experienced moderate levels of burnout. The researchers recommended paying attention to professors' mental health and examining personal variables, coping strategies, emotional intelligence, and academic specialization in relation to burnout (Mellal & Mehrez, 2018).

The term **burnout** was first introduced by psychiatrist Bradley (1974) to describe a category of work-related psychological stress. Later, psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger (1974) used it to refer to people who became victims of burnout under life stress. The term gained popularity after a series of studies by psychologist Christina Maslach (1976) aimed at identifying symptoms associated with occupational exhaustion. Maslach, with her colleague Susan Jackson, defined burnout as emotional exhaustion resulting from work stress, leading to a loss of interest in others (Canoui et al., 2004, p. 7).

Burnout frequently affects workers in human service professions, such as professors, social researchers, doctors, nurses, and others, due to the nature of their work, which requires continuous effort, empathy, and human engagement, often resulting in severe stress and physical and mental exhaustion. These professionals are more likely to experience burnout symptoms compared to other professions (Askar, n.d., p. 102).

The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) defines burnout as a syndrome characterized by a set of signs, symptoms, and behavioral changes in professional settings, encompassing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. It typically evolves through multiple stages: initial immersion, depersonalization, and a critical stage where physical, psychological, and behavioral symptoms intensify, including impaired social communication (DSM-5, 2015, p. 27).

Burnout develops gradually, progressing through stages according to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Grebot, 2008, p. 11).

The challenges faced by university professors—economic, physical, psychological, social, pedagogical, and relational—may lead to psychosomatic illnesses, sadness, pessimism, indifference, low motivation and performance, frequent absenteeism, and even the desire to quit work entirely. Burnout is thus considered an emotional-cognitive syndrome resulting from continuous exposure to occupational stress. It is one of the most common occupational disorders in academia, not merely transient fatigue, but potentially developing into more complex disorders such as occupational depression, chronic anxiety, and sleep disturbances.

The phenomenon has become more prominent in recent years due to rapid academic transformations, such as hybrid teaching, increased research workloads, digitalized evaluation, and expanded professional expectations (Guijarro et al., 2025). This article highlights the psychological determinants that make university professors more susceptible to burnout amidst these ongoing changes.

First: Concept of Burnout

There are multiple definitions of psychological stress; thus, it is preferable to classify these concepts in a critical

framework, as presented by Cooper et al. (2001, pp. 81-83).

1. First category of definitions

Burnout is defined as chronic stress, depression, and frustration occurring when an individual believes in their failure and inability to achieve goals and expectations. The criticism of this category is that it conflates burnout with other distinct concepts, such as depression and chronic stress, which may be related but are not identical. Distinguishing between burnout, depression, and chronic stress is necessary to avoid confusion. Depression, for instance, is a distinct psychological condition that may result from burnout but is not a component of it. Chronic stress refers to prolonged physical and psychological strain from heavy work, which may not necessarily cause burnout. Conditions such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) are not synonymous with burnout, though they may share some features and could indicate vulnerability to burnout. Chronic stress arises from increased workload, whereas burnout is broader, encompassing emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion, primarily due to interactions with others in the workplace.

2. Second category

This defines burnout as an individual's response to work-related pressures. Imbalance between work demands and available resources triggers emotional responses characterized by anxiety, tension, and psychological pressure, which in turn alter attitudes and behaviors, including defensive coping and identity disturbance.

3. Third category

Here, authors do not distinguish between boredom and fatigue, defining burnout as physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to emotionally challenging situations. Modern revisions maintain emotional exhaustion as a core component and replace identity disturbance with depersonalization, referring to broader disruptions in work attitudes, and replace "professional efficacy" with personal accomplishment.

Acute psychological stress arises from sudden severe negative events (e.g., job loss), whereas chronic burnout develops gradually through prolonged exposure to perceived adverse work conditions, with most frameworks prioritizing chronic stress (Cooper et al., 2001, p. 82).

4. Fourth category

This is the currently accepted definition, originating in the 1970s and early 1980s. Maslach defined burnout as:

"An individual's experience of emotional exhaustion, identity disturbance, and reduced personal accomplishment resulting from continuous exposure to work stress. Burnout is typically accompanied by physical and emotional symptoms, relational disturbances with colleagues, friends, and family, and disruptions in attitudes, beliefs, and personal convictions."

Maslach (2011) describes three stages:

- **Emotional exhaustion:** arising from work pressure and poor interpersonal relationships, reducing energy for expected tasks.
- **Identity disturbance:** characterized by negative attitudes toward others, indifference, mood instability, and weak interaction with colleagues.
- **Reduced personal accomplishment:** where the individual feels unsatisfied and unfulfilled professionally, believing efforts are wasted and future success unattainable.

Second: Models and Theories Explaining Burnout

Several models and theories explain the occurrence of burnout, most based on Maslach's three-component model. Differences exist regarding the relative importance of each component in burnout development.

• Chernis's Model of Burnout:

This model posits that both work environment and personal traits can cause strain. Workers attempt to cope in various ways, including adopting negative attitudes

toward work, resulting in aversion. This negative shift in attitude is considered central to burnout in this model, which does not precisely define essential burnout characteristics, making the concept broad and unclear.

- **Glemp-Biowski Stage Model**

It is one of the most widespread models and theories of burnout development, presented by Glembiewski and colleagues in 1984. It is based on the assumption that burnout has three core components, which were previously discussed when defining burnout. However, this model assumes that the second of these three components—identity disturbance and impaired relationships with others—is the first stage of burnout. When the demands and difficulties of the role increase, and pressures on the worker reach a certain level, burnout manifests as a disruption in the sense of identity, which appears in failure when dealing with clients and encountering many problems with them. As a result, the individual develops a sense of lack of personal accomplishment at work, which constitutes the third component of burnout. This means that this theory views the decline in personal accomplishment as the second stage in the development of burnout; it occurs subsequently due to the identity disturbance, which initially arises from increased perceived pressures in the work environment. Ultimately, the increase in both identity disturbance and the individual's perception of inability to achieve personal accomplishment leads to emotional exhaustion as a result of the individual's failure to cope with the pressures in the previous two stages. This means that emotional exhaustion is the final stage in the burnout process and the most severe and difficult.

Based on this general conception of how burnout forms and develops, Glembiewski and colleagues presented a detailed model of the stages of burnout in light of its three core components that we indicated.

- **Leiter and Maslach Model**

This model was first introduced in 1988 and underwent some modifications and developments in 1991 and 1993. This model, like the previous one, assumes that emotional exhaustion is the central component in the burnout process. However, it differs from the previous model by asserting that emotional exhaustion develops first in this process, not as the final stage of burnout. It also emphasizes that pressures arising from interaction with others at work, as well as those stemming from role demands, lead to emotional exhaustion. This depletion reduces personality cohesion and leads to its disruption, making the individual unable to cope with and manage feelings of emotional exhaustion properly. Identity disturbance is fundamentally a negative coping response that occurs when other coping mechanisms fail. With this identity disturbance and its increase, the individual begins to lose the sense of accomplishment in their work because this disturbance significantly reduces personal and professional goals related to their work.

- **Interactive Perspective on Burnout**

The vast majority of burnout studies are based on Maslach's conception of burnout as a result of environmental conditions (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). However, empirical results and theoretical interpretations now call for agreeing with some researchers on the necessity of viewing burnout from an interactive perspective. The first step of this interactive model is to examine work situations associated with or leading to burnout. Of course, this will include personality variables. The final step is to understand how work situations interact with personality so that they together influence burnout. Individuals most at risk of burnout are those who have pre-existing negative perceptions and interpretations of work situations and lack personality traits that protect them from falling into burnout and expressing it behaviorally (Collbert et al., 2004).

General Comment on Theories and Models Explaining Burnout:

It is observed from the previous models explaining the origin and development of burnout that there is no consensus among them regarding the nature of burnout dimensions, their significance in its emergence and development, their interrelationship, whether this relationship is sequential—appearing one after another—or parallel—rising together to relative degrees for each burnout dimension, and other interpretations that primarily focused on burnout as a product of the work environment with its many sources of psychological stress.

Therefore, the importance of the interactive perspective lies in its emphasis on personality traits and their interaction with environmental conditions in the emergence and development of burnout (Moataz Abdullah, 1988).

Previous Studies on Burnout:

Most burnout studies are based on Christina Maslach's view that it consists of three core components or dimensions: emotional exhaustion, loss of identity, and reduced personal accomplishment. The results of these studies have gone in two main directions: the first confirmed the validity of the Maslach scale and its significance in measuring burnout, while the second focused on the scale's efficiency in measuring burnout with its three components.

From the theoretical findings on burnout, it can be concluded that the currently applied model in most studies is Maslach's model with its three dimensions, which can be measured through the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

From a psychopathological perspective, burnout is treated as a condition resulting from chronic stress and emotional responses to it, which may accompany or overlap with depressive disorders and anxiety conditions (Zhao & Ding, 2019). It is viewed in terms of personality traits and coping mechanisms.

Second: Current Academic Transformations and Their Impact on University Professors' Lives:

What characterizes these transformations is the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a radical change in life in general and academia in particular through many innovations, most notably:

- Widespread transition to hybrid education and the need to prepare multimedia content.
- Increasing international publication requirements linked to university rankings.
- Expansion of administrative responsibilities and scientific committees.
- Increased student numbers and reduced resources.
- Growing academic competitiveness within the institution.
- Difficulty reconciling professional and personal life.

Mohamed-Amar & Mohamed-Amar (2024), in their study entitled "*Burnout Syndrome among University Professors in the Post-COVID-19 Period*", showed that such transformations were among the direct causes of burnout among university professors because they created a pressurized environment by forming psychological determinants of stress and, consequently, burnout.

Third: Psychological Determinants of Burnout among University Professors at Present:

From the theoretical overview of burnout, we can identify psychological determinants that apply to university professors, including:

1. **Continuous Occupational Stress:** Contemporary studies confirm that high teaching loads, pressure to publish in indexed journals, and quality expectations increase levels of emotional exhaustion among professors (BMC Psychology, 2025). This type of stress is linked to work characteristics, such as increased preparation hours, sometimes after work at home, sudden changes in university

policies, resulting in changes in decisions and commitments.

2. Coping Strategies:

Zhao & Ding (2019) indicated that professors relying on immature defensive mechanisms such as avoidance, denial, or cognitive withdrawal toward work stress from current transformations are more prone to burnout, while mature strategies such as problem-solving, cognitive reappraisal, and seeking support and assistance are indicators of preventive mental health.

3. Low Social Support:

Social support is an important source of effective psychological and social assistance. The amount of support and satisfaction with it affects how individuals perceive stressful life events, cope with them, and handle them effectively. Social support reduces psychological suffering caused by exposure to stressful events and protects self-esteem, thereby lowering the risk of burnout and related symptoms (Ali Abdelsalam Ali, 2005, p.14).

Scientists identify three roles for social support in coping with stressful life situations such as burnout:

- **Direct main role:** Increased social support directly reduces individual stress, regardless of the severity or magnitude of stressors.
- **Mediating role:** Social support mediates between exposure to stressful situations and their negative effects, which may lead to burnout.
- **Moderating role:** Social support reduces the association between exposure to stressful situations and their negative effects, which may lead to burnout, as social support helps individuals effectively cope with stressors and problems.

Most predictive studies consider social support as a moderating variable, based on the assumption of stress absorption, indicating that the relationship between stressful situations and their negative effects and burnout varies according to the

level of social support received, serving as a protective shield (Winsubst & Scharbrocq, 1996).

A review (Behavioral Sciences, 2024) indicates that support from colleagues, social support, and management contributes to reducing burnout by alleviating feelings of professional isolation. Lack of support is associated with increased depersonalization due to the perception that academic efforts are unappreciated.

4. Conflict Between Academic Role and Professional Identity:

The multiple roles of university professors (teaching, research, supervision, administrative tasks) are a major psychological determinant of burnout, especially in competitive academic systems (Melal, Mehrazi, 2024). This study confirmed that role ambiguity increases exhaustion levels and weakens the sense of accomplishment.

5. Low Self-Efficacy:

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their competence, capability, mastery, and self-worth. It determines motivation, problem-solving ability, mental health, and resilience to stress. High self-efficacy increases the ability to cope with stress, while low self-efficacy reduces effort and increases the likelihood of failure. Self-efficacy differs from outcome expectations, which concern beliefs about the consequences of actions (Ahmed Abdelkhalek, 2009, p.373).

McAdams (ibid., p.375) identifies four sources of self-efficacy:

- Actual accomplishment: Previous success and failure experiences.
- Vicarious experiences: Observing others' successes and failures.
- Verbal persuasion: Others' feedback on one's abilities.
- Emotional arousal: Degree and quality of emotional alertness in a situation.

Semmer (1996) notes that self-efficacy and self-esteem are affected by stress sources leading to burnout, and although conceptually distinct, they are practically

interrelated. Professors may feel incapable of:

- Keeping up with rapid technological developments.
- Meeting international publication standards.
- Managing academic workload.

Low self-efficacy leads to collapse in the belief in ability to accomplish, a key determinant of burnout.

6. High Emotional Reactivity to Stress:

Some professors are highly sensitive to stressors, such as professional anxiety, guilt over unaccomplished tasks, and chronic tension, making them more prone to burnout.

7. Weak Time Management Skills as a Psychological Determinant to Avoid Burnout:

• Time Management Concept:

Moussa (1973) defines it as optimal utilization of time through planning, organizing tasks, and completing them on schedule, requiring avoidance of time-wasting factors and proper allocation of daily, monthly, and yearly duties and priorities.

Abu Sheikha (1991) defines it as counting, identifying, organizing, distributing time appropriately, and investing every moment optimally according to plans linking objectives and methods to execution time, with continuous monitoring and evaluation. Malika (1991) defines time management as managing activities and tasks performed within time, using available resources efficiently to achieve important goals.

The researcher notes that time management does not literally mean controlling time itself but organizing oneself relative to available time through planning, analysis, and continuous evaluation of activities to use time and resources optimally, balancing available time and goals (Suleiman, 2017, p.189).

This determinant is among the most important psychological predictors of burnout among university professors in a multitasking environment, where poor time

organization increases cognitive load due to:

- Transition between face-to-face and digital (hybrid) education.
- Coordination of research, supervision, and grading tasks.
- Pressure from regular meetings, etc.

We have mentioned most psychological determinants that predispose university professors to burnout due to current academic transformations; however, there are other determinants, such as certain personality traits:

- **Excessive perfectionism:** Leads to overworking without limits.
- **Neuroticism:** Increases negative stress response.
- **Overactive conscientiousness:** Causes fatigue from excessive commitment.

Conversely, professors with flexible or highly adaptive personalities show lower levels of burnout.

Fourth: Interpretation of Interaction of Psychological Determinants of Burnout Regarding Current Academic Transformations:

From the general theoretical framework and the key psychological determinants for university professors, it is evident that high and continuous occupational stress makes professors vulnerable to burnout, especially with low self-efficacy, weak coping strategies, lack of social support, and role-identity conflict. High emotional responses to stress, combined with weak time management and organization of cognitive tasks, form a continuous chain gradually leading professors to burnout amid current academic transformations.

Fifth: Preventive Proposals to Reduce Burnout among University Professors Amid Current Academic Transformations:

Through the analysis of the article's topic, we can reach the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen and develop psychological assistance and support centers to accompany

professors within university institutions.

2. Raise awareness and train professors to learn strategies for coping with modern pressures.
3. Enhance self-efficacy through training programs in modern techniques.
4. Raise awareness of the importance of social support.
5. Develop time management skills and organize cognitive workload.
6. Reorganize work burdens and distribute tasks fairly.
7. Strengthen a supportive work environment through academic leadership focused on professional well-being.
8. Burnout prevention programs based on mindfulness and balance techniques.

Conclusion

Burnout among university professors at present represents the outcome of a complex interaction between individual psychological determinants and occupational pressures resulting from rapid academic transformations. Understanding these determinants helps universities to develop effective strategies to protect their human resources. Investing in the mental health of university professors is not a choice but a necessity to ensure educational quality and the continuity of scientific research.

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