Research Article

Between Pressure and Performance : A Study of Burnout Profiles among Moroccan Middle Managers

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Abstract

This study builds on a doctoral research project examining occupational burnout in Moroccan private-sector companies, with a particular focus on middle managers. Its objective is to identify the organizational and psychosocial demands that contribute to burnout within this group. Although global awareness of burnout is increasing, the academic literature still shows a notable gap regarding the psychological profiles of managers experiencing burnout in Morocco. This research seeks to bridge that gap by providing a deeper, context-specific understanding of the phenomenon.

A qualitative and exploratory methodology was adopted, combining life-narrative interviews with psychometric questionnaires. This dual approach was designed to capture both the subjective experiences and the measurable psychological dimensions of burnout, thereby enabling a comprehensive exploration of the individual and organizational factors that trigger or sustain the condition.

Data analysis revealed four distinct psychological profiles of middle managers in burnout : the Autopilot, who functions mechanically despite emotional exhaustion ; the Excessively Devoted, whose overcommitment leads to self-neglect and eventual collapse ; the Work-Suffocated, overwhelmed by excessive workload and lack of recognition ; and the Wasted Talent, demotivated by a persistent mismatch between skills and assigned responsibilities. These profiles underscore the complexity of burnout experiences and highlight the need for tailored prevention and intervention strategies within organizational settings.

Keywords : Burnout ; Psychological profiling ; Middle managers ; Qualitative interviews.

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Introduction

While burnout (BO) has been widely examined in both empirical and theoretical literature since the 1970s, it was not until 2004 that the International Labour Organization (ILO) formally recognized it as a psychosocial workplace risk. In contrast to many developed countries that have revised their labor policies to address emerging psychosocial hazards, Morocco has yet to update its Labor Code since its adoption in 2004. Consequently, key psychosocial risks—such as stress, burnout, and workplace harassment—are still not officially acknowledged as occupational diseases.

This regulatory gap is particularly concerning in light of recent statistics. The 2024 Gallup Global Workplace Report reveals that 45% of Moroccan employees experience work-related stress, 29% report frequent feelings of anger, and 34% often feel sadness at work. Moreover, around 35% are considering changing jobs, indicating widespread professional dissatisfaction. These findings underscore the urgent need for organizations in Morocco to integrate emotional well-being and employee engagement into their core human resource and organizational strategies.

Our doctoral research, which serves as the basis for this article, contributes to this ongoing debate by providing empirical evidence on the causes, manifestations, and impacts of burnout, particularly among mid-level managers in the Moroccan private sector. Drawing on a mixed-method approach that combined life-narrative interviews with quantitative questionnaires, we explored the subjective experiences of professionals suffering from burnout and brought their often-overlooked suffering to the forefront.

An in-depth analysis of the distribution of burnout symptoms among the participants reveals a relatively high overall burnout level (47.6%). Specifically, 63.49% reported physical exhaustion, 61.05% experienced persistent mental rumination, and 45.10% reported intellectual fatigue. Additionally, 36.46% experienced concentration difficulties, while 31.91% were emotionally depleted (El-Abbadi & Bazine, 2023). These alarming figures reflect the serious deterioration of mental and physical health among private-sector managers in Morocco, affected across cognitive, emotional,

psychological, and physiological dimensions. Based on responses from 327 participants, our findings expose a critical phenomenon that continues to draw the attention of researchers, health professionals, and policymakers advocating for its legislative recognition.

Building on these results, our article focuses on the profiling of burnout to deepen understanding of the phenomenon. Through this lens, we identify the primary risk factors, classify burnout profiles, and assess their impact on individual well-being and professional performance. By employing psychometric tools and qualitative interviews, the profiling process categorizes managers based on the specific sources of their stress and exhaustion, such as work overload, lack of recognition, role ambiguity, repetitive tasks, and work-life imbalance. This analytical framework offers a more nuanced comprehension of burnout's determinants and lays the groundwork for personalized interventions at both individual and organizational levels.

Ultimately, this article aims to deliver a precise mapping of burnout profiles, grounded in the lived experiences of affected professionals, their stress responses, and their degree of organizational commitment. By doing so, we seek to inform practical strategies for prevention and intervention tailored to the Moroccan workplace context.

Theoretical and conceptual framework of burnout

Several researchers, particularly psychologists and sociologists of work, have investigated the antecedents of burnout since its first description by American psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974. While working in a free clinic for individuals with substance use disorders, Freudenberger observed symptoms among volunteer caregivers—such as progressive fatigue, mood disturbances, and behavioral changes. These observations led him to introduce the term burnout to describe their psychological state. Subsequently, research on burnout expanded beyond caregiving professions to a wide range of occupations. Empirical studies have shown that burnout can occur in almost any professional context, including jobs with limited human interaction. As Schaufeli and Taris (2005) note, there is no justification for restricting burnout exclusively to the human services sector.

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In 1977, Christina Maslach began her pioneering studies on professional strain, initially in the medical and mental health fields, later extending to the legal profession. Her research played a decisive role in validating and conceptualizing burnout. Over time, numerous definitions and interpretations emerged, with scholars framing burnout either as a process or as a state (Leroy-Frémont, Desrumaux, & Moundjiegout, 2014). Freudenberger (1981) argued that burnout results from perceived failure in achieving one's goals, leading to frustration. Similarly, Cherniss (1980) described it as an emotional shock occurring when professional life no longer aligns with personal expectations. Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as a syndrome composed of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Pines and Aronson (1988) emphasized its roots in emotional strain from difficult professional contexts, which manifest in physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Enzmann, Schaufeli, Janssen, and Rozeman (1998) underlined the role of demanding environments where discrepancies arise between individual expectations, efforts, and organizational demands. Farber (2000) distinguished three types of burnout: "wear and tear," affecting those exposed to injustice at work; the "classic" type, which impacts highly committed individuals seeking fulfillment; and a third type linked to monotonous and unstimulating environments.

Truchot (2004) conceptualized burnout as a consequence of excessive professional demands, while Martiat (2005) urged caution, highlighting the need to differentiate between burnout and job stress. He noted that burnout is characterized by a negative attitude toward one's work and professional environment, whereas stress can arise in any occupational situation. Building on the conservation of resources theory, Shirom and Melamed (2006) proposed that burnout comprises three dimensions: physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion.

Different disciplinary perspectives offer complementary insights. Psychologists and psychiatrists tend to view burnout as the expression of individual vulnerability, advocating preventive measures, awareness campaigns, and therapeutic interventions such as psychological support or medication (Kirouac, 2012). Sociologists, by contrast, frame burnout as a social pathology rooted in the idealization of performance fostered by contemporary capitalist values (Taylor, 1999). Cognitive approaches define it as the outcome of a two-step appraisal process: a primary evaluation of the severity of a stressor (e.g., "acceptable" vs. "problematic"), followed by a secondary appraisal where individuals seek coping strategies.

Among these perspectives, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory developed by Hobfoll (1989) has been particularly influential. This motivational theory emphasizes the resources individuals mobilize to pursue their goals. Burnout arises when these resources are threatened (e.g., job insecurity), lost (e.g., unemployment), or when efforts invested do not yield the expected returns (e.g., lack of recognition or promotion) (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). Shirom and Melamed (2006) further refined this approach, identifying three interrelated components of burnout: physical exhaustion (a lack of energy that hinders daily tasks), emotional exhaustion (reduced ability to sustain interpersonal relationships), and cognitive weariness (slowed thinking and diminished mental agility).

Methodology used

The objective of our doctoral research is to understand the development of burnout among Moroccan mid-level managers. To achieve this, we focused on managers exhibiting symptoms of burnout and facing persistent difficulties in their professional environment, particularly those working in the private sector. Our choice of this population is based on several reasons. Studies have shown that the nature of managerial work and their strategic position within the company are key factors in emotional exhaustion (Technologia, 2014), stress, and chronic fatigue experienced daily (Loriol, 2006; Courpasson & Thoenig, 2008) (El-Abbadi & Bazine, 2023).

Sample and data collection

To gain a deeper understanding of managers' work-related difficulties, we first conducted a pilot survey by administering a screening questionnaire to managers from various organizations. The aim was to measure burnout levels and identify the job demands most likely to deplete professional resources. Based on the questionnaire results, we contacted selected respondents and invited them to participate in face-to-face, life-story interviews. Fourteen interviews were carefully chosen to include only managers who exhibited high levels of burnout.

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We diversified the sample across sectors and geographic locations (cities) to obtain a comprehensive view of the problems and difficulties that may lead to professional burnout. Selection criteria included age, seniority, level of education, and position held.

After transcribing the interviews, we applied three coding techniques: initial coding, grouping, and thematic coding. This procedure produced an exhaustive list of codes (categories/themes) that faithfully reflected the interviewees' statements. To ensure coding reliability, multiple researchers from the research team independently coded the data; codes were then compared, consolidated, and organized into thematic clusters.

At this stage, we conducted an occurrence analysis to identify and quantify the frequency of recurring themes in the corpus (El-Abbadi & Maghni, 2019). The underlying assumption was that the more frequently an idea appeared, the more meaningful it was for the speaker. We complemented frequency counts with relational (co-occurrence) analysis to examine how elements of the discourse interrelated, thereby enriching the interpretation beyond simple occurrence statistics. For the fourteen transcripts, we followed Osgood's step-by-step procedure to perform relational coding on all textual fragments and identify co-occurrences directly related to our central theme (El-Abbadi, 2020).

Following this contextualization and qualitative data collection, the study proceeded in two distinct quantitative phases:

1. Exploratory quantitative phase — conducted on a sample of N = 327, this phase aimed to purify and refine the scale items.
2. Validation phase — tested the research hypotheses and the proposed model using a questionnaire administered to the target population of managers (El-Abbadi & Bazine, 2023).

The tested model underwent external validation to verify, for each reflective construct, external validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. An internal evaluation was also performed by examining the coefficient of determination (R^2) and the significance of regression coefficients via Student's t-tests. Consistent with Chin's (1998) recommendations for PLS analysis, we used bootstrap resampling to assess the statistical significance of the model coefficients.

Psychological profiling

In our study, we employed psychological profiling to develop a typology of managers experiencing burnout. Psychological profiling, as defined by Bartol and Bartol (2014), is a structured investigative method used to analyze behavioral patterns, personality traits, and underlying motives to better understand individual functioning, especially in forensic settings. However, its utility extends far beyond criminology. According to Canter (2004), psychological profiling draws on various data collection methods—including observations, psychometric assessments, and in-depth interviews—to triangulate information and produce a comprehensive, objective analysis. This technique has proven valuable across multiple domains such as clinical psychology (Gudjonsson & Haward, 1998), human resources (Furnham, 2008), and marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2016), where understanding psychological drivers is critical to decision-making. In this context, our use of profiling offers a nuanced lens for interpreting burnout phenomena in managerial roles.

For our doctoral research, life-story interviews and burnout measurement questionnaires provided valuable data, allowing us to categorize exhausted managers into different profiles. The results obtained from the various analytical techniques outlined above enabled us to identify the root causes of burnout among Moroccan managers (Figure 1). A deeper analysis of these causes led to the development of four distinct burnout profiles.

Determinants of burnout

The deterioration of managers' working conditions can largely be explained by the combination of excessive job demands and insufficient resources. These pressures stem from organizational, relational, personal, and task-related factors.

Middle managers, in particular, are subjected to an intense work pace and heavy workload. Their responsibilities include file processing, meetings, follow-ups, business trips, and handling challenging or restrictive situations. This accumulation of duties often creates an imbalance: the volume of tasks becomes disproportionate to the available time. As a

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result, fatigue emerges, which in many cases progresses to physical exhaustion.

Another recurring concern raised by participants is the lack of recognition, which significantly undermines professional well-being. Superiors often fail to show appreciation or provide words of encouragement, and financial recognition (e.g., bonuses, salary increases) is rarely granted despite the quality of work delivered. This absence of acknowledgment generates feelings of sadness and injustice, gradually fostering disengagement. For some managers, this leads to professional rigidity; for others, it manifests in chronic health problems. Many emphasize that the lack of recognition has adversely affected both their physical and emotional states, contributing directly to burnout.

Role ambiguity also emerged as a major stressor. Some managers operate without a clear job description, while others are frequently assigned tasks outside the scope of their role. This situation creates both quantitative and emotional overload, often resulting in physical health issues as well as negative emotions toward the organization.

The accumulation and repetitiveness of tasks were also identified as critical factors. When work becomes monotonous and repetitive, it generates boredom, mental exhaustion, and feelings of futility. Routine tasks, performed without optimization or opportunities for improvement, drain managers' mental energy, foster negative attitudes—especially toward superiors—and can even lead to somatic illnesses such as chronic back pain.

Finally, managers highlight the profound disruption of their work-life balance. The pressure of organizational demands, combined with excessive workloads, spills over into their personal lives, affecting both physical and emotional well-being. This strain is compounded by feelings of guilt arising from the difficulty of reconciling professional responsibilities with personal commitments.

Profiles of exhausted middle managers

Profiling analysis identified four types of exhausted middle managers: the Wasted Talent, the Autopilot, the Work-Suffocated, and the Excessively Devoted.

The Wasted Talent

This profile combines strong performance with a lack of recognition and significant role ambiguity, creating a frustrating and energy-draining situation. Despite their skills and commitment, these managers face unclear responsibilities and vague expectations from superiors.

"I am stressed by deadlines but also, at times, by the lack of understanding of the tasks I need to perform. Sometimes, I am assigned a task that is not clearly defined, yet I have to complete it without knowing precisely what is expected. Once finished, I receive criticism, which is even more stressful because I don't know how to improve. Moreover, I don't have a team: I work alone and must deliver to someone who has subordinates. That person can divide the work among several people, while I must double my effort to achieve the same result alone." (Middle Manager 13)

Managers in this profile excel in their work but receive neither recognition nor advancement opportunities. They often endure contradictory instructions or ill-defined roles, forcing them to take initiatives without proper validation, which heightens stress. The mismatch between their dedication and the lack of acknowledgment leads to profound frustration.

"There is no clear job description defining which tasks fall under my responsibilities. We end up doing everything... and sometimes, paradoxically, nothing structured. For example, I handle quality issues with suppliers, even though that should be the responsibility of the quality department. I invest enormous effort, but there is no recognition—neither verbal nor financial." (Middle Manager 7)

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The Autopilot

This profile is characterized by a heavy workload combined with extreme monotony, creating an oppressive and demoralizing environment. These managers are overwhelmed with repetitive, low-value tasks that leave them feeling trapped in a cycle without progression.

Their work is voluminous but lacks intellectual stimulation. Each day resembles the previous one, offering no opportunities for learning or advancement. This dual burden—physical exhaustion from workload and mental exhaustion from monotony—leads to disengagement and loss of enthusiasm.

"Are you here to repeat yesterday's work? What is this? This is workplace monotony! Now, I'm just here to redo yesterday's work today and tomorrow… always the same processes, the same procedures. And if we ever want to propose an improvement, we hit a wall: 'No, we don't want optimization; we just want the task done.' Today, I feel stuck in a routine with no development or learning." (Middle Manager 8)

The Work-Suffocated

This profile experiences relentless pressure and excessive workload, resulting in chronic stress.

These managers are overwhelmed with unrealistic demands, leaving no room to breathe or recover.

"I am involved in multiple projects, which sometimes makes me lose track. There are too many things to handle at once. Between traveling to meet different stakeholders and managing back-to-back emergencies, I can't cope. For five months, I didn't take a single break. At the factory, the workload was already heavy due to poor task distribution. I had too many emergencies, too many tasks, and thousands of unread messages." (Middle Manager 6)

They face constant pressure from management, clients, and deadlines, creating a permanent sense of urgency. Forced into hyperactivity, they juggle multiple tasks simultaneously without adequate resources or support.

"I couldn't find time for myself. I worked Monday to Friday, 8 AM to 7 PM, without a break. Once home, I ate and slept. My personal life was completely disrupted." (Middle Manager 14)

The Excessively Devoted

This profile consists of managers who invest unlimited time, energy, and emotion into their work. Perfectionist and passionate, they often overcommit, sacrificing their well-being. While highly productive, they are particularly vulnerable to severe burnout because they struggle to set boundaries.

"I pulled all-nighters; I stayed with my boss until 1:30 AM the night before a holiday, preparing his presentations. In the last few days, I worked even more nights because I over-invest in my work and don't know how to step back. I didn't even have time for myself because I was connected to my job 24/7." (Middle Manager 3)

"My refuge was always work. Spending a weekend without checking my PC or logging in made me feel guilty, as if I had done something wrong. Normally, weekends are for rest, but for me, work had completely taken over." (Middle Manager 3)

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These managers set ambitious goals and strive for perfection, often taking on more than they can reasonably handle. They have difficulty delegating, believing they are best suited for certain tasks. They frequently work beyond office hours, answer emails at night, and remain available even during supposed rest periods.

"I stay at the office until 6 PM, then bring files home to prepare in the early morning. I wake up at 5 AM to process files before leaving for the office. I cannot take a vacation—at best, I stay home but remain reachable 24/7." (Middle Manager 12)

Although deeply committed, this excessive devotion blinds them to warning signs of fatigue, making them highly susceptible to severe burnout.

Conclusion

Profiling work involves the identification, analysis, and interpretation of behaviors, characteristics, and dynamics of individuals or groups based on specific criteria. In this study, profiling exhausted managers provided a deeper understanding of the causes and manifestations of professional burnout by categorizing typical profiles according to sources of stress, coping mechanisms, and workplace behaviors.

The profiling was conducted through a rigorous qualitative approach, combining life-narrative interviews with psychometric questionnaires. The analysis identified four distinct burnout profiles: the *Excessively Devoted*, the *Work-Suffocated*, the *Autopilot*, and the *Wasted Talent*. Each profile reflects specific psychosocial stressors, including work overload, lack of recognition, role ambiguity, repetitive tasks, and poor work–life balance.

This research contributes to academic literature, research methodology, and organizational practice by offering actionable insights into the complex phenomenon of managerial burnout. It also underscores the relevance of psychological profiling as a tool in occupational health strategies and organizational interventions.

Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical framework of this research is primarily based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 1998, 2001, 2011), a well-established model in burnout studies. This theory posits that stress occurs due to the loss—or threat of loss—of valuable resources, and that individuals with fewer resources are especially vulnerable to further depletion, potentially triggering a downward spiral. In this framework, job demands play a central role :

- They can diminish or compromise personal and professional resources, leading to burnout.
- They may have a direct negative effect on emotional well-being.
- They can also act as mediating or moderating factors in the relationship between resources and mental health at work.

The study confirms that it is job demands that impact resources, rather than the reverse.

Methodological Contribution

This study's methodological contribution lies in its pragmatic stance and mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative techniques (content analysis, thematic matrices, and tree structures) with quantitative tools (PLS method, SPSS). A key innovation is the construction of an empirical model of professional burnout.

A particularly novel aspect is the psychological profiling, developed through life narratives, co-occurrence analysis, and weighted frequencies. This method enabled the identification of distinct psychological profiles among mid-level managers—*Excessively Devoted, Work-Suffocated, Autopilot*, and *Wasted Talent*—based on their resources, their interactions with job demands, and their emotional responses. These typologies allow for a nuanced understanding of the burnout process.

Practical Contribution

Preventing psychosocial risks begins with awareness, education, and targeted training for managers. It is essential to equip them to

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recognize early signs of distress, particularly those indicative of burnout. A manager's role extends beyond supervision ; they are responsible for safeguarding the psychological well-being of their teams. This includes monitoring mental health regularly and incorporating it into annual evaluations. Organizations must support this role by ensuring structural follow-up and embedding prevention strategies within HR policies.

Another key area is the rebuilding of the collective work environment, especially through stronger managerial proximity. Managers should demonstrate empathy, care, and exemplary behavior. In turn, companies should facilitate communication spaces where managers and employees can engage in open dialogue. These organizational resources foster trust and support, which are essential for managing heavy workloads and reducing internal tension.

Finally, addressing burnout requires a balanced effort-reward relationship. Cultivating a culture of recognition, where achievements and proactive behaviors are valued—whether verbally, symbolically, or materially—is crucial. Recognition serves as a powerful lever for motivation, engagement, and overall well-being at work.

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