

PARENTAL BURNOUT: THE CASE OF GREECE

Marina Stamati

PhD candidate, Department of Cultural
Technology and Communication,
University of the Aegean, Greece,
ctd18010@ct.aegean.gr

ABSTRACT— *The modern way of life and the great fluidity that prevails at the economic and social level create a new, often exhausting reality for parents, whose endurance is tested daily between their work and the complex care of the family. This study investigates the term Parental burnout because in recent years, the term burnout has been widely used, mainly to describe burnout, a series of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that arise after a period of intense engagement with work. There are, however, other forms of burnout, less discussed but equally important for a person's overall quality of life. One of them is parental burnout, which is often encountered. Greek society is dominated by the idea that parents are never tired and parenthood offers only positive experiences, it is difficult for parents to admit that they are not omnipotent. Parental burnout is a separate condition from occupational burnout and depression. The methodology followed in this study is the thorough study of the bibliographic production as well as the relevant publications in scientific journals related to Parental burnout from 2010 to today in Greece and abroad.*

Keywords: Parental burnout, causes, treatment, Greece

1. INTRODUCTUON

Being a parent is a difficult and often draining experience. Certainly, the joy someone gets from one's children is incomparable to anything else, but the reality is that many parents face burnout (Roskam, et al, 2017).

Parenthood is demanding. Life can feel like an endless cycle filed with obligations and expectations along with feelings of isolation. Being a parent often brings you face to face with a wide range of daily obligations (e.g. homework etc.) and with acute (sibling conflicts, tantrums etc.) or chronic (behavioral problems, health problems, etc.) stressors and as a result people often feel inadequate in their role as parents. This situation can lead to ineffectiveness, parental aversion, increased risk of developing depression as well as other psychological problems. (Mikolajczak, Gross & Roskam, 2019)

2. PARENTAL BURNOUT

Parental burnout refers to parents' physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion during the upbringing of one or more children (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2020: 10). Both sexes can face parental burnout, but is more common among women. This fact can have many interpretations, especially considering that women are forced to assume more roles within the family structure than their male counterparts (e.g. maternal, professional, etc.). As a result, most of the time they are immersed in those roles, without being able to spare any time for personal or other activities, which can have a therapeutic effect, alleviating some of the strain every day life can cause. (Roskam et al., 2020: 485; Giosafat, 2010:62-64).

Since parental burn out mostly concerns one of the two sexes worldwide, efforts have been made to highlight the gender dimension of the phenomenon from psychological and sociological perspectives. Parental burnout is classified among similar phenomena, whose causes can be found within the family structure and the roles individuals have in it. Without a doubt, nurturing and raising a child is not an easy task. Parents ensure that their children's needs are met the best way possible. In addition, parents are often consumed with doubt whether their children are properly raised and are concerned about how they should raise them in order for them to become self-sufficient adults in the future. The risk of facing a burnout is increased when the aforementioned anxieties are combined with anxieties and insecurities that occur in everyday life. As a mother's role is often more multidimensional than a father's, we can presume that this is a way to interpret parental burnout's gender dimension. However, the above position should not, at any point be considered as fixed, as there are many cases where parental burnout's gender dimension is reversed (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018: 3; Kounenou, 2010: 236-241).

Because of its gender dimension, parental burnout is often confused with postpartum depression. The two phenomena share many common characteristics; however, there are aspects that noticeably distinguish them. At first, it is worth mentioning that parental burnout occurs in mothers who have children over eighteen months old. Secondly, comparing to postpartum depression, parental burnout is not as much connected to factors related to the social and marital context. Finally, parental burnout, in contrast to postpartum depression, can affect general activities that are not associated with parental duties (Athanasίου, 2022: 190; Bigner & Gerhardt, 2021: 184). The term burnout is more commonly associated with the professional arena and employee burnout. Burnout was initially linked with parenthood in the USA, in a study conducted on the burnout of parents raising children who were facing serious health issues (Jaramillo et al., 2016: 29; Roskam et al., 2017). However, at the beginning of the 21st century the term became generalized, as it was observed that symptoms of parental burnout can also be experienced by other parents, whose children are not facing serious health issues and lead a normal life, always based on the qualitative characteristics of each society with minimal deviations from the average (Séjourné et al., 2018: 276-280; Mikolajczak et al., 2021: 333, 336).

3. CAUSES OF THE PHENOMENON

Like any other individual case related to "burnout", the causes of parental "burnout" are important to be examined because of society's social, political and economic context in a wider or more limited form. People who show symptoms of parental burnout are usually unable to meet the demands of the daily roles they have assumed and are overwhelmed by anxiety and stress. The aforementioned condition worsens when parents don't have the financial means to either provide their children with everything they need or everything the parents think they may need. A person is at greater risk to face parental burnout when there are physical or mental health issues within the family, whether these issues are concerning children themselves or the parents.

It is possible that the arrival of a new family member can bring along parental burnout. In this case, parents often feel that with the arrival of the new member, family's needs and therefore obligations, that exclusively fall upon them, are increased. However, due to the fact that each time period holds different objective difficulties (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic) these obligations may not be able to be met or parents may be given the impression that they will not manage to appear consistent. Due to this, feelings such as worry, and anxiety are reinforced, and the chances of parental burnout are increased. For example, during the quarantine due to the Covid -19 pandemic and the subsequent health crisis, the percentages of parents who showed symptoms of parental

burnout increased greatly, as parents felt that because of the new condition they would not be able to meet their children's needs.

Another cause related to the occurrence of parental burnout is society's structure and culture, where each family belongs to. Each society is uniquely structured, with individual cultural elements and characteristics. In other words, families can face negative criticism because of their characteristics, such as for example their occupation and economic status, the gender of both parents, the gender of the children, the children's performance at school, children's behavior in society and in general the feedback families receive regarding their children. This phenomenon is heightened in small and closed societies found in provinces and communities. On the contrary, the phenomenon is smoothed out if the built urban environment includes broad and open societies (Griffith, 2020: 728; Séjourné, 2018: 284-286; Mikolajczak et al., 2020b: 675-680; Bigner & Gerhardt, 2021: 200; Htouris & Zisi, 2020: 42-51).

Finally, parental burnout becomes more difficult to deal with if not treated in time, more specifically when the first symptoms of stress occur, and every time any form of treatment is postponed. In practice, many parents, even though they realize they are burdened with feelings of anxiety stemming from causes related to the upbringing of their children, refuse to ask for help (or even to admit their feelings - acceptance is the first stage of awareness) because they are afraid they may receive negative criticism from society or their close environment. The suppression of these feelings, their non-manifestation, and the refusal of any assistance, essentially leads to burnout. For this reason, it is important to accept such condition and follow the most suitable treatment (e.g. with sessions with a psychologist who specializes in similar issues) (Mikolajczak et al., 2020b: 675-679; Antonopoulou, 2018: 45).

4. SYMPTOMS OF PARENTAL BURNOUT

Each person can experience different types of parental burnout. The most common is emotional distancing from one's children and feelings of nervousness and anxiety. This is also the main reason why parental burnout is often confused with postpartum depression. In fact, many people experience parental burnout along with depression and excessive stress. In this context, parents suffering from parental burnout doubt if they fulfill their parental duties well enough. These people tend to isolate themselves, feel inadequate and express anxiety and anger, sometimes even unjustifiably (Mikolajczak et al., 2020b: 674-676; Roskam et al., 2017: 163).

Parental burnout's symptoms are related not only to mental health but also to physical health. More specifically, people with symptoms of parental burnout experience fatigue, headaches, and general muscle aches. Practically, any symptoms related to mental breakdown can be somatized (Roskam et al., 2017: 163).

Also, people suffering from parental burnout tend to suffer from emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation and also have feelings of despair. In fact, they tend to isolate themselves from any social interaction and deliberately refrain from activities that previously were pleasant to them. In addition, their appetite and sleep are affected. In addition, individuals suffering from parental burnout withdraw from activities that involve their children's nurturing (Roskam et al., 2018: 758).

Finally, parental burnout can generally affect an individual's health, his/her relationship with him/herself and his/her partner. In practice, the intractable conditions that the couple must face can cause trembles in their relationships which usually lead to emotional distancing, lack of

empathy, barriers to meaningful communication and tensions. Essentially, the ever-increasing tension between both parents mirror and represent the ever-increasing stress. Finally, the untimely intervention and refusal of professional help affects the children, who acquire psychomotor difficulties that may follow them into adulthood (Roskam et al., 2021: 70; Bigner & Gerhardt, 2021: 364-366; Katak, 2012; Séjourné, 2018: 277-279)..

5. FACING PARENTAL BURNOUT

Parental burnout is represented as intricate and difficult to treat, but in no case should it be considered that it is impossible to be effectively treated. The first step is acceptance. This is the most essential step, since acceptance means recognizing and understanding one's feelings and the situation in general. In this way, one or both parents can ask for help from a professional, who specializes in parental burnout cases. Parents' close cooperation with a specialized professional can help with the symptoms of parental burnout and therefore lead to a more rightful and meaningful communication both between the parents and their children (Lindahl Norberg et al., 2014: 301).

Also, there are activities that can help relieve unpleasant emotions, such as sports, art, or creative writing (Vakali et al., 2013: 14). As mentioned above, parental burnout can affect both people's physical and mental health (Blanchard et al., 2021: 8). For this reason, it is important to organize a daily routine which will cover not only the needs of the children and the needs of the parents themselves (e.g. engaging in favorite activities, essentially short breaks and quality night or midday sleep) (Mikolajczak, 2020a; Hatzi, 2022: 292). Finally, an important step to prevent the phenomenon could be the training of parents in Greece with an institutional background, since no person knows inherently how to be a good parent and what are the real needs of a child..

6. PARENTAL BURNOUT IN GREECE

To understand the concept of parental burnout in Greece, it is important to clarify that the Greek family, as an institution, is heavily influenced by the cultural, economic, legal, and religious context. First, the cultural context is influenced by the history and the geographical location of the country, since Greece is located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The economic context is shaped both by the country's participation in the world market and globalization. The legal framework tends to parallel the Western world's law. Finally, the religious context deeply affects the Greek family, as attitudes, values and norms that have their origins in Christianity are embedded within it (Mousourou, 2005: 34; Misel, 2000; Kaltsouni – Nova, 2018: 167-167).

The Greek family traditionally functioned as a production unit. Each member assumed specific roles, depending on age and gender. During last century, the Greek family started to adopt the form of "extended family". However, Western influences transformed it into a "nuclear" one. This transition harmonizes to a large extent with Greece's transition from an agricultural economy to a service economy. With this transition, the family members' roles changed, and thereof roles are not anymore related and entirely dependent on the age and gender of the members (Bofou, 2020: 7; Kaltsouni – Nova, 2018: 174-175).

Nowadays, the Greek family is an institution that has various formations (e.g. single-parent family). In most families, children are also included, who are either biological or adopted (e.g. same-sex couples). Parents raise their children assuming, among other things, the parental role,

which is equally shared, without being a woman's exclusive responsibility (Kataki, 2012: 5). Parental burnout in Greece became more apparent at the beginning of the Greek financial crisis (2009 – 2018). The financial strength of Greek families was greatly reduced, resulting in many parents' inability to raise their children the way they wanted. Also, the economic hardships led Greek parents to work many more hours than in the past and many times in more than one job, as a result of which they are charged with many roles and responsibilities (Kounenou, 2010: 207-217; Papasarantopoulos, 2011: 211).

According to Kasem (2020:36), during the Greek economic crisis, many parents stated that they were overwhelmed when it came to raising their children and added that they would not proceed with making another child due to financial hardships and lack of time. In fact, one in two parents reported that they cannot raise their child in the way they wish, and this fact leads them to anxiety and insecurity. However, only one in twenty parents consider parental burnout as a possibility and almost exclude visiting a specialist (psychologist or parenting school) as they consider that the emotional pressure is parodic and due to the difficulties of the time they live in (Kasem, 2020: 45, 80).

Single-parent families also face similar difficulties (due to divorce or emigration). In this case, parental burnout is considered a result of financial, social, and psychological issues. More specifically, the single-parent family is more financially vulnerable than the nuclear family. Likewise, single parent families more easily receive criticism from their environment (e.g. for the reasons for a divorce, school bullying, etc.). In practice, a single parent has many more issues to manage as well as more roles, as he/she is called upon to shoulder everything concerning the child. This is likely to lead to parental burnout (Kogidou, 1995; Kounenoy, 2010: 212; Kaltsouni – Nova, 2018).

During the Covid-19 outbreak, parental burnout occurrence in Greece increased, because of poor communication between parents, financial insecurity, the health crisis and the confinement. Parental burnout in Greece exists, however it is still not known to a legitimate extent. However, it now gathers the interest of the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, research and more information on the subject are expected to see an increase (Htouris & Zisi, 2020: 47).

7. CONCLUSION

An attempt was made to examine the syndrome of parental burnout, whose manifestation is multifactorial. It is not only a product of an individual's dysfunctional emotion-regulation strategy or just a personality trait, but, above all, it is a syndrome based on the chronic imbalance between risk factors and protective resources, that are available to parents while raising their children, in combination with other factors. In addition, the deterioration of parents' physical and mental health as well as the emergence of negative parenting behaviors has sparked international research community's interest to further study this syndrome. The increasing prevalence of the phenomenon - especially along with the emergence of the health crisis - and its detrimental effects both on the well-being of an individual and a family, reinforce the need to develop coping strategies and, at the same time, make it necessary to design targeted interventions. Parents need to be calm and self-satisfied, so that they can balance between their different roles in life: parent, partner, friend, worker. Paradoxical as it may sound, parents must spend time in activities that satisfy them to be able to be devoted to their children.

It is extremely important to point out that parenting, like any area of life, can be an equally draining and rewarding experience. Some of the negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear and shame hold us back as parents. However, it is unfair to remain in a disadvantageous position because of uncritical social norms, that forces us to live unhappily with unresolved problems.

Self-love consequently shows love towards a child. Children feel and understand a lot. That is why since we are their first image of the world, it is good to take care of our psyche.

8. REFERENCES

- Antonopoulou, H. (2018). Mental and physical stress-burnout of parents with an autistic child. Literature review of research data. *Panhellenic Conference of Education Sciences*, 8, 41-46. (in Greek).
- Athanasiou, A. (2022). *The burnout of parents. When being a parent is overwhelming*. Athens, Greece: Black Rows. (in Greek).
- Bigner, J. Gerhardt, C. (2021). *Parent-Child Relationships. Introduction to Parenthood*. Athens, Greece: Pedio. (in Greek).
- Blanchard, M. A., Roskam, I., Mikolajczak, M., & Heeren, A. (2021). A network approach to parental burnout. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 111, 104826.
- Giosafat, M. (2010). *Growing up in a Greek family. The psychosexual development of the child and the role of the parents. A psychoanalytic approach*. Athens, Greece: Arnos. (in Greek).
- Griffith, A. K. (2020). Parental burnout and child maltreatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Family Violence*, 1-7.
- Hatzi, N. (2022). *Parental burnout: The burnout of parents*. Athens, Greece: Arnos. (in Greek).
- Hetherington, C., Oliver, M. K., & Phelps, C. E. (1989). Resident assistant burnout: Factors of job and gender. *Journal of College Student Development*, 30, 266-269.
- Htoutis, S., & Zisi, A. (2020). Our social self, family and social attitudes during the covid-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020. *Social Research Review*, 41-64. (in Greek).
- Hubert, S., & Aujoulat, I. (2018). Parental burnout: When exhausted mothers open up. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1021.
- Jaramillo, S., Moreno, S., & Rodríguez, V. (2016). Emotional burden in parents of children with trisomy 21: Descriptive study in a Colombian population. *Universitas Psychologica*, 15(1), 29-38.
- Kaltsouni – Nova, C. (2018). *Family and Family Relations*. Athens, Greece Gutenberg. (in Greek).
- Kasem, E. (2022). *Parental Burnout in Greece and in the world*. Kavala, Greece: Social University. (in Greek).
- Kataki, H. (2012). *The three identities of the Greek family. Psychosocial processes*. Athens, Greece: Pedio. (in Greek).

- Kogidou, Δ. (1995). *Single Parent Families. Reality, Perspectives, Social Policy*. Athens, Greece: Livani. (in Greek).
- Kounenou, K. (2010). *Family Counseling and Therapy. Intervention Models. New Types of Family. Family and Work*. Athens, Greece: Papazizi. (in Greek).
- Lindahl Norberg, A., Mellgren, K., Winiarski, J., & Forinder, U. (2014). Relationship between problems related to child late effects and parent burnout after pediatric hematopoietic stem cell transplantation. *Pediatric Transplantation*, 18(3), 302-309.
- Mikolajczak, M., & Roskam, I. (2020a). Parental burnout: Moving the focus from children to parents. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, (174), 7-13.
- Mikolajczak, M., Gross, J. J., Stinglhamber, F., Lindahl Norberg, A., & Roskam, I. (2020b). Is parental burnout distinct from job burnout and depressive symptoms?. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 8(4), 673-689.
- Mikolajczak, M., Gross, J. J., & Roskam, I. (2019). Parental burnout: What is it, and why does it matter? *Clinical Psychological Science*, 7(6), 1319–1329. doi.org/10.1177/2167702619858430.
- Mikolajczak, M., Gross, J. J., & Roskam, I. (2021). Beyond job burnout: Parental burnout! *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 25(5), 333-336.
- Muncie, J., Wetherell, M., Langan, M., Dallos, R. & Cochrane, Al. (2009). *Family. The study and understanding of family life*. Athens, Greece: Metahmio. (in Greek).
- Misel, A. (2000). *Sociology of Family and Marriage. Basic Facts about the Greek Family*. Athens, Greece: Gutenberg. (in Greek).
- Roskam, I., Raes, M. E., & Mikolajczak, M. (2017). Exhausted parents: development and preliminary validation of the parental burnout inventory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 163.
- Séjourné, N., Sanchez-Rodriguez, R., Leboullenger, A., & Callahan, S. (2018). Maternal burn-out: an exploratory study. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 36(3), 276-288.
- McLanahan, S., Beck, A. (2010). Parental relationships in fragile families. In S. McLanahan., R, Haskins., C, Paxson., I, Sawhill (Eds.), *Fragile Families*, 20, (2), 17-38 Princeton: The Trustees of Princeton University & The Future of Children.
- Mousourou, L. M. (2005). *Sociology of the Modern Family*. Athens, Greece Gutenberg. (in Greek).
- Mpoufou, M. (2020). *Exploring the Views of Parent Education Program Trainers on their Contribution to Changing Participants' Attitudes and Practices*. Korinthos, Greece: Univeristy of Pelopponisos. (in Greek).
- Papasarantopoulos, P. (2011). *Myths and Stereotypes of the Greek Crisis*. Thessaloniki, Greece: Epikentro. (in Greek).

Roskam, I., & Mikolajczak, M. (2020). Gender differences in the nature, antecedents and consequences of parental burnout. *Sex Roles*, 83(7), 485-498.

Roskam, I., Aguiar, J., Akgun, E., Arikan, G., Artavia, M., Avalosse, H., & Mikolajczak, M. (2021). Parental burnout around the globe: A 42-country study. *Affective Science*, 2(1), 58-79.

Roskam, I., Brianda, M. E., & Mikolajczak, M. (2018). A step forward in the conceptualization and measurement of parental burnout: The Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA). *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 758.

Roskam, I., Raes, M. E., & Mikolajczak, M. (2017). Exhausted parents: Development and preliminary validation of the parental burnout inventory. *Frontiers in psychology*, 163.

Vakalo, A., Zografou-Tsantaki, M. & Kotopoulos, T. (2013). *Creative writing in kindergarten*. Thessaloniki, Greece: Epikentro. (in Greek).