

Youth care workers' burnout

A comparison with youth workers working with normative youth and the implications of coping with it

An Israeli Point of View ⁽¹⁾

Summary

This study investigates whether there are differences in the level of burnout in youth care workers working with detached youth in comparison with the level of burnout in youth workers working with normative youth. The study also investigates whether the years of experience in working affects the level of burnout in youth workers. A review of research on burnout and its influence on the worker is presented. The study hypotheses were: (1) the level of burnout in youth care workers is higher than the level of burnout in youth workers working with normative youth. (2) There is a significant relationship between years of experience in working and the level of burnout in workers with detached youth. The study findings confirmed the first hypothesis with respect to the greater burnout in youth care workers than in youth workers working with normative youth. No correlation was found between the years of experience in working and the level of burnout. The study findings indicate a need for a more-in-depth investigation into the causes of burnout characteristics youth care workers of detached youth, and not necessarily related to years of experience. Such an investigation, which requires additional systematic research, will enable selecting the relevant and/or critical areas for developing an effective program for worker accompaniment and guidance. The program will help youth care workers engaged in complex, highly demanding and frustrating work, providing them with the multi-faceted skills to deal with youth who have study related problems and the arduous interaction with them, as well as the tools to deal with their own conflicting emotions that lead to burnout.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate the level of the youth care worker's burnout in comparison to that of the youth workers working with normative youth. Youth care workers working with detached youth that drop out of normative educational systems work in special units designated by the municipalities as part of the municipal educational and social services. Recent studies on detached youth in Israel stated that the detached youth are considered a difficult group to handle in light of their diverse problems.

A recent study conducted by Kahan-Stravachinsky et al. (1998) which studied a representative group of 13,000 detached youth being treated at these units shows a wide diversity of problems. For instance in reference to a fourth of these youth the head of the household does not work, 40% have only an elementary education and among 10%-12% there was a history of child abuse or neglect in their families. Furthermore they found that about 40% of these youth had criminal records.

The youth care workers working with normative youth work in informal educational frameworks such as: community centers, youth groups and youth clubs, at schools and in the communities.

Youth care workers are under constant pressure but because of the large rate of employment replacements this issue has not been systematically researched. The findings of this study can serve as a basis in reference to the critical situation of the care workers and the need for professional supervision as described in the discussion.

Most of the descriptions of burnout in the welfare services professions ascribe it to the continuous and emotionally demanding interaction of the service providers with their clients. The psychological pressure to which the professional worker is exposed, is exacerbated by the idealized approach internalized during training in the profession which focused solely on the problems and needs of the client, to the exclusion of mental resources renewal in the service provider (Etzion, 1984).

The following section presents a review of the literature on burnout.

Review of the literature

Definitions of burnout refer to the mental and physical exhaustion that characterizes the burnt out person. The differences in the definitions lie in their focus on different causes of burnout.

Freudenberger (1974) describes the 'burnout syndrome' among volunteer care workers in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers in New York. He gives an account of the feelings of disappointment, and goals losing the meaning that the caregiver had wanted to accomplish. He points to idealistic people, who are overly achievement oriented, with unrealistic expectations, as a high-risk group for burnout.

Freudenberger and Richelson (1980) describe burnout 'as a state of exhaustion or frustration that one brings upon oneself, as a result of dedication to a goal, way of life or relationship that fails to meet expectations' (p. 13).

Pines, Kafri and Etzion (1980) state that burnout is expressed in three dimensions of fatigue and exhaustion: physical, emotional and mental dimensions. These are characterized by a low level of energy, chronic fatigue, weakness and exhaustion. Burned out people report physical responses in the form of: headaches, nausea, high muscle tone, as well as feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, depression, development of negative self image and negative attitudes to life, work and society. Lauderdale (1982) explains that fundamentally, burnout reflects a gap between expectations from the professional role and what is actually achieved. He divides high-risk work into seven groups: (1) Work lacking social prestige; particularly those jobs in which prestige fails sharply (teachers, social workers, caregivers); (2) Work in

which the individual has risen quickly up the ladder, and has nothing left to achieve or aspire to; (3) Work in which the worker is given considerable autonomy in his field; (4) Work featuring little interaction (among workers) combined with little prestige; (5) Work in large plants and organizations; (6) Jobs in which the rules are rigid and harsh, without any consideration for the worker; (7) Complicated jobs that are not accompanied by supervision or guidance.

The following studies investigated burnout in areas of education and welfare similar to that engaged in by youth care workers. In Israel, Gallant (1986) investigated differences in burnout of competent-self-image and dogmatism among teachers in established versus disadvantaged schools. The study found differences in burnout and the effect on the teachers' personalities as a function of the type of students they taught. The study findings indicated that the level of teacher burnout at disadvantaged schools was higher than that at established schools.

Nir (1987) examined burnout among social workers during their first two years of work in the profession. The study found significant emotional burnout among this group.

Cohen (1990) studying 'the extent of the relationship between burnout in social workers during their first five years of work in the profession, the worker's sex and the degree of social support' - found that burnout already appears in the first two years of work in the profession, and that the rate continues to grow during the first five years, particularly among women.

Jayaratne and Chess (1986) studied the effect of burnout on the lives of female welfare workers and on their relationship with their families. They found that strong feelings of burnout affect their lives and lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and anger.

In another study, Jayaratne and Chess (1984) obtained similar findings in an investigation of burnout, job satisfaction and the desire to change jobs among social, welfare and health workers.

Savicki (1993) investigated burnout among children and youth care workers in different care agencies in comparison with other care workers such as counselors or workers treating outpatients. He found different types of burnout responses in the groups studied, which were directly related to the different nature of the work environment of youth care workers from that of other care workers. According to his findings, one should be careful not to include all care workers with disadvantaged populations in a single occupational category when investigating the nature of burnout, even if the internal differences between the groups are slight or insignificant.

Support for the uniqueness of this group of workers may be found in a study by Schultz et. al (1995). They suggested a theory that combines dimensions of environment and framework with personality traits as predictors of burnout. Their findings indicated that the framework and organization were particularly important in care worker burnout, more so than the severity of the state of the clients in their care.

The findings of the studies reviewed indicate a high degree of burnout among service care providers, particularly those dealing with groups with multiple problems. Youth care workers who work with detached youths are continuously exposed to the problems of adolescents experiencing difficulties in conventional socio-educational frameworks who drop out, have difficulty staying within their boundaries and adhering to the norms, and are frequently

involved in criminal activity (Lahav 1992). Hence the greater burnout among youth care workers than among their worker colleagues who work with normative youth.

It is therefore hypothesized that (1) the level of burnout among youth care workers would be higher than among youth workers working with normative youth; (2) there would be a stronger relationship between the years of experience in working and the burnout in youth care workers than in youth workers working with normative youth.

<i>How often do you feel:</i>
1. Tired
2. Depressed
3. You had a successful day
4. Physically exhausted
5. Emotionally exhausted
6. Gratified
7. Drained
8. You've had it
9. Miserable
10. Weary
11. Trapped
12. Unimportant
13. Strained
14. Troubled
15. Disappointed and wary of people
16. Weak
17. Hopeless
18. That you repulse people
19. Optimistic
20. Full of energy
21. Apprehensive

Appendix A. *21 Item questionnaire*

Method

Subjects

The first sample consisted of 55 youth workers in two groups. The first group consisted of youth care workers and the second of youth workers working with normative youth from the center of Israel. Ages ranged from 20 to 49 (see Table 1, next page). Questionnaires that lacked important details were rejected, leaving 36 questionnaires which were used for the study. The study population involved workers not accustomed to being included in research studies and this fact influenced the amount of participants in the final sample group. Nineteen

youth workers working with normative youth remained in the first group and 17 youth care workers remained in the second group. The proportion of participants who dropped out of the research was similar in both groups. Thus, this was most probably not the source of a validity problem.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Youth Workers in Study, based on the Demographic Questionnaire Findings*

Youth worker		Youth workers working with normative youth	Youth Care Workers
Variables		N=26	N=29
Age	Mean	27.3%	30.5%
	Range	20-37	22-49
Sex	(M)	34.6%	34.5%
	(F)	65.4%	65.5%
Marital Status	Single	50.0%	44.8%
	Married	46.2%	51.8%
	Divorced	3.8%	3.4%
Education	High School	26.9%	14.3%
	Diploma	3.9%	3.6%
	Academic	65.4%	82.1%
	Other	3.8%	—
Experience	1 year	11.5%	17.2%
	2 years	19.2%	20.7%
	3 years	7.7%	13.8%
	4-6 years	19.3%	13.8%
	7-8 years	15.4%	6.9%
	9-10 years	23.1%	20.7%
	No tenure	3.8%	6.9%
Employment	Full-Time	84.6%	65.5%
	Part-Time	15.4%	34.5%
Professional Guidance	Receives	96.6%	88.5%
	None	3.4%	11.5%

* Calculation of the percentage to 100% is horizontally for each item and for each group separately.

Study questionnaires

1. Demographic Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains various questions on background variables for youth workers such as: age, sex, country of birth, education, years of experience in the present field of engagement, the scale of the position (full time, part time, etc.), and qualifications for the job.

2. Burnout questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Pines, Aronson & Kafri (1978). The questionnaire contains 21 items (Appendix A). Subjects are requested to record the frequency with which they feel or experience certain emotions and physical states such as that stated in the items according to a Lickert scale with a seven-point choice. The Cronbach internal reliability index ranges from 0.90 to 0.95. Reliability tests have been conducted on groups in Israel by researchers since 1978 (Pines, Kafri & Etzion, 1978). Validity stems from the theoretical definition of burnout. Prior research findings have shown a correlation ($r=0.45/0.73$) between burn out, dissatisfaction from work and life itself (Diamond, 1982; Gilad, 1996).

Procedure

The questionnaires were sent to community centers and to youth care units selected randomly from the center of the country. Questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Results

The study findings confirmed the first hypothesis - the presence of greater burnout among youth care workers than among youth workers working with normative youth. The findings showed that youth care workers reported a significantly higher level of burnout in the general score of the questionnaire than that reported by youth workers working with normative youth.

Table 2 (next page) presents the means and standard deviations only for the dimensions of burnout for which significant differences were found between the groups.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the dimensions of burnout for which significant differences were found between the two study groups

Youth worker groups	Youth workers working with normative youth		Youth Care Workers			
Variable	N=19		N=17		t	% expl. Var.
How often do you feel:	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
1. Tired	3.26	1.15	4.06	0.83	2.36*	14.1
4. Physically exhausted	2.68	1.38	3.94	1.09	3.01*	21.0
7. Drained	2.63	0.95	3.88	0.99	3.85**	30.4
9. Miserable	1.31	0.75	2.59	1.28	3.69**	28.6
10. Weary	2.57	0.90	3.35	1.22	2.17*	12.2
13. Strained	2.74	0.80	3.53	1.07	2.53*	15.8
15. Disappointed and wary of people	2.74	1.15	3.52	0.72	2.45*	15.0
18. That you repulse people	1.58	1.12	2.59	1.00	2.83**	19.1
19. Optimistic	5.89	0.99	4.94	1.19	-2.60*	16.6
20. Full of energy	5.79	0.98	4.82	1.18	-2.68*	17.4
Total	3.08	0.17	3.51	0.19	3.19*	23.0

* $P < .05$

** $P < .001$

The second hypothesis was not supported. A weak, insignificant relationship between the years of experience in working and burnout was found within the two research groups. The low correlation indicates that there is no relationship between the variables in the groups studied.

Discussion and conclusions

The study findings confirmed the first hypothesis. Working as a youth care worker as an occupation has a direct impact on burnout. Detached youth' cognitive and intellectual limitations, disruptive behavior and lack of faith in the establishment place difficulties on their integration in the education system and on their socialization during adolescence. These shortcomings make

life difficult for the worker with such youths, and dictate the nature of the worker's intervention in the educational process as well as the demands on the professional role of the worker.

Such youths, who need help, do not seek it from the relevant institutions, because of their sense of alienation from society, which from their point of view 'warrants' cutting off ties with society. It is therefore the worker who initiates the contact with such youth, locates them 'in the field' and tries to create the bridge between them and the normative society.

Work with detached adolescents may be on an individual or group basis. During the treatment process, the adolescent is at the center of attention. It is the professional function of the youth worker to focus on the adolescent being helped, to give assistance, to be understanding and supportive of the adolescent's needs, and at the same time, to examine and communicate with the adolescent's environment in order to find suitable ways of properly integrating the adolescent in society. Perspectively, the educational process to which the adolescent is subjected is lengthy, complicated, unpredictable, and the work is seen by the care worker as consisting of giving. This giving is often perceived by care workers to be one-sided, and on many occasions, youth care workers are faced with disappointments and have their expectations shattered by the detached adolescents.

The sources of difficulty in the work faced by the youth care worker are many and varied. An investigation in this regard, to select situations for a workshop for new youth care workers in the Ministry of Education and Culture in Israel (Romi & Teichman, 1996) pointed to three circles to be coped with. The first circle consists of the detached adolescents. The second circle consists of professional colleagues, such as social workers, juvenile probation officers and the third and least mentioned circle consists of the 'authorities'. The average youth care worker has many supervisors and superiors. Some are in the youth care unit, such as the co-ordinator and supervisor. However, there are often politically motivated municipal officials who see this field as an opportunity for declarations and intervention to advance their own personal interests.

This puts the worker in a situation of continuous exposure to pressures and build up of a heavy emotional load, which, as the study shows, results in a high level of burnout.

This contrasts with the control group of youth workers working with normative youth, which does not necessarily lead to the high level of burnout.

Despite the strong relationship between burnout and working with detached youths, no definitive or significant relationship was found between the years of experience in working and burnout. The low correlation may prove that there is not necessarily a relationship between the variables in the groups studied.

These findings, which are not in accord with the study hypothesis and the background studies which found the years of experience to be a personal variable that affects burnout, may be explained by the conjecture that burnout in youth care work is *not the product of years of experience* i.e., time elapsed, but rather the product of *the nature of the work itself*, manifested in the worker's various interactions. Nevertheless, it is possible that a larger sample is required for a more in-depth investigation of this variable.

The practical implications of this study, even if preliminary and based on a small sample, indicate the urgent need for the pertinent authorities to *recognize* the *actually high* level of burnout among youth care workers in comparison with other types of youth workers. Such recognition is important in order to deal with the phenomenon now, and not only as a measure of preventive action for the future.

To deal with such burnout, usually professional guidance is given, this has already become the norm in the education and welfare services. Examples can be found in McCulloch and O'Brien's (1986) study in which they focus on youth care worker's burnout and the organizational aspects involved (see also Lamanna, 1992; Kupers, 1996; Powers, 1996).

However, guidance alone is not enough. The fact that most of the participants in this study were under professional guidance strengthens this point and shows the need for focused and efficient guidance as shall be discussed. It can be concluded that the guidance given presently is not sufficiently efficient. Thus, it is highly recommended that guidance be planned to meet the needs of the worker in as effective a manner as possible. The guidance must be very practical and supportive (Aivad-Heyblum, 1992), with integrative reference to the typical situations faced by the worker receiving the guidance, often more so than to the skills themselves. Emphasis on skills is liable to dissociate them from their actual meaning in the field. (Romi, 1989).

There is also a need for a more focused definition of roles. A clearer definition of the role of the youth care worker may help to diminish burnout. Glass (1990) found a drop in the level of burnout in liaisons for the disabled on a kibbutz the more the liaisons perceived the role to be well-defined. Selk-Yum (1993) presents similar findings which indicate that a vague perception of the care worker's role contributes to burnout.

Note

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