



Herbert J. Freudenberger and the making of burnout as a psychopathological syndrome

Herbert J. Freudenberger e a constituição do burnout como síndrome psicopatológica

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Resumo

O burnout se tornou um tema amplamente investigado no âmbito da psicologia organizacional. Sua definição e escopo são objeto de um debate científico e político internacional. Enquanto um dos fundadores do conceito, Herbert J. Freudenberger desempenhou um papel importante na formação da pesquisa sobre o burnout. Este artigo segue os diferentes sentidos e transformações do conceito de burnout ao longo de sua carreira, baseado em uma leitura minuciosa de suas obras. A metodologia é inspirada na história de objetos psicológicos de Danziger e por estudos que mostram a importância de metáforas no raciocínio científico. Os resultados mostram a importância do movimento Free Clinic e da psicanálise na descrição original de Freudenberger. Duas metáforas são identificadas e analisadas como o cerne do burnout: o burnout como uma síndrome e o homem como um sistema de energia. A conclusão argumenta que um melhor conhecimento sobre o passado do burnout pode ser a chave para modificar seu desenvolvimento futuro.

Palavras-chave: burnout; história de objetos psicológicos; stress ocupacional; medicalização; metáfora.

Abstract

Burnout has become a widely researched topic in the field of organizational psychology. Its definition and scope are the object of an internationally sustained scientific and political debate. As one of the founders of the concept, Herbert J. Freudenberger has played an important role in the shaping of burnout research. This paper follows the different meanings and transformations of the burnout concept throughout his career, based on a close reading of Freudenberger's own work. The methodology is inspired by Danziger's history of psychological objects and by studies that show the importance of metaphors in scientific reasoning. Results show the importance of the Free Clinic movement and of psychoanalysis in Freudenberger's original description. Furthermore, two metaphors are identified and analyzed as being the core of burnout: burnout as a syndrome and man as an energy system. The conclusion argues that more knowledge about burnout's past may be the key to change its future development.

Keywords: burnout; history of psychological objects; occupational stress; medicalization; metaphor.

Burnout syndrome is today a widely researched topic. Some figures can give a more precise meaning to this assertion: Schaufeli and others (2009) estimated the existence of at least 6,000 works on burnout; Maslach and Leiter (2014) claimed that about 1000 articles are published each year on some aspect of burnout, a fact which led to the creation of a dedicated scientific journal, *Burnout Research*, which was published from 2014 to 2017.

However, despite the sheer quantity of papers and research, not that much attention has been given to the historical origin of the concept. Muheim (2013) has found similarities between burnout syndrome and features of biblical characters, as well as characters from literature and previous diagnoses. How to define the scope of a research on burnout history, given such an array of possibilities? We prefer to follow Friberg (2009) and Hoffarth (2017), who focus on the period from the 1970s onward and search to analyze the subject from a critical conceptual and historical approach. Our restrictive choice was to study only what is explicitly treated as burnout (and, of course, its variations burnt out, burn out, burn-out), leaving aside the comparison with other diagnoses and also the search for a burnout not named as such.

The burnout expression appeared in print on a novel by Greene (1960/2004), and on papers by Bradley (1969) and Sommer (1973), but in none of these publications there was the intention to turn this expression into a concept with a definition. This step was taken by Herbert J. Freudenberger (1926-1999), Jewish psychoanalyst of German origin settled in the United States of America (USA). Schaufeli and Buunk (2003) recognize that Freudenberger had a pivotal role in the proposal of a "burnout syndrome" and in the definition of the phenomenon. However, we couldn't find any study that is dedicated only to Freudenberger, which seems to show that he is not seen as an author to be studied in itself. Considering the importance of his contribution to a concept that has had such a prolific outcome, we believe that he deserves a more special treatment. The main goal of the present paper is to present a general view and interpretation of the conception and evolution of his ideas about burnout, based on a close reading of the author's own work.

Methodologically, our approach is inspired by Kurt Danziger's history of psychological objects (Brock, 2015; Danziger, 1997, 2010) and several studies that have showed the importance of metaphors in psychology (Brown, 1992; Gentner & Grudin, 1985; Leary, 1994; Pickering, 2006; Roediger, 1980; Soyland, 1994) and in human thought (Black, 1954, 1977; Carone, 2011; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, 1999). We aim to follow the different meanings and transformations that the burnout concept undergoes throughout the work of Freudenberger. In



doing so, we exercise a mainly theoretical study (Fontes & Falcão, 2015); Laurenti, Lopes, & Araujo, 2016; Slife & Williams, 1997) and recognize affinity with the internalist approach in the history of psychology (Hilgard and others, 1991), insofar as a great deal of effort is made to scrutinize the work and ideas of one single author, emphasizing a close reading of his own texts.

To attain our goal, it was necessary to demarcate the extent of Freudenberger's scientific production. An estimation has counted more than 90 works, considering articles, book chapters and monographs (Gold Medal Award for life achievement in the practice of psychology, 1999), while another estimation affirms that there would be more than 100 items (Canter & Freudenberger, 2001). Our search was able to identify 87 items (Fontes, 2016), which makes it certainly unfinished, but close enough to the total number to serve as a guide in the absence of a more complete list. The analysis that follows is based on 23 texts: 21 articles and 2 books.

The emergence of the burnout concept

The context of the emergence of the burnout metaphor in Herbert J. Freudenberger's work is the Free Clinic movement. According to Freudenberger (1971a), the movement emerged when the first Free Clinic was created in 1967, in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, in order to serve the indigent and young population, who sought care for issues such as "infections, bad drug trips, venereal diseases, abscesses, and general medical problems" (Freudenberger, 1971a, p. 169). Freudenberger visited the Haight-Ashbury district in 1967 and 1968, before helping to organize a Free Clinic in New York, which opened in January 1970 (Freudenberger, 1969a, 1971b, 1971c). At that time, Haight-Ashbury was a center that attracted people from all over the USA, due to the effervescence of the hippie movement. The summer of 1967 became known as the "summer of love" and was considered the peak of the vividness in the area. Drug use was common and there was, in many hearts, the hope of a revolution in the realm of behavior and values that would spread throughout the nation. Freudenberger himself wrote at least two texts reflecting a concern on the ongoing conflict of generations (Freudenberger, 1969b, 1970).

As for the Free Clinic movement, it did in fact have a strong expansion: only four years later, Freudenberger (1971a) would claim that there were 80 of them in the USA and Canada. At the third meeting of the National Free Clinic Council in 1973, the estimated number of free clinics in these two countries was 300, with a workforce of 3,000 people (Freudenberger, 1973a). For Freudenberger, the Free



Clinic was not only social work, but an instrument for questioning the traditional medical model and provoking change in a community (1971b, 1973b). The word "free" has more than one meaning in this context. It is "free" because the clinic did not charge for care, and functioned mainly through voluntary work and donations. But it also meant that the clinic was the result of a philosophy of community life that was proposed as an alternative to traditional society, animated by the spirit of questioning and sharing that the hippie culture gave rise to.

It is in the context of the discussion on the psychologist's work in free clinics that the issue of burnout is examined by Freudenberger. After addressing (1) the organizational structure of the clinic and (2) the risk of having professionals identifying themselves with the patients, the third subject is that of the "burnt out syndrome" (Freudenberger, 1973b, p. 56), written in quotation marks, with the verb *burn* conjugated in the past participle and without a hyphen. A syndrome that Freudenberger recognizes as a problem that he had suffered himself and which he relates directly to the context of working in a Free Clinic (Freudenberger, 1973b).

The St. Mark's Clinic operated from Monday to Friday, from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., and received approximately 40 patients per night (Freudenberger, 1971a). Thus, Freudenberger (1973b) reflects on the work conditions:

most of what you do there you do after your normal professional working hours (...) you start your *second* job when most people go home (...) And you put a great deal of yourself in the work. You demand this of yourself, the staff demands it of you, and the population that you are serving demands it of you. As usually happens, more and more demands are made upon fewer and fewer people. You gradually build up in those around you and in yourself the feeling that they need you. You feel a total sense of commitment. The whole atmosphere builds up to it, until you finally find yourself, as I did, in a state of exhaustion (p. 56).

It is clear in Freudenberger's description that his understanding of the burnt out syndrome is based on the relation he had with his own work. In another text, he states that he worked 10 to 12 hours during the day, as a psychoanalyst in his office, and then worked until midnight or more in the free clinic (Freudenberger, 1975). In the 1973b article, despite using the word "syndrome", the author does not seek to establish signs and symptoms that characterize it but rather, provides the extremely autobiographical description reproduced above.

He goes on observing that other volunteers in therapeutic communities who work with drug users have sought him in a state of "depression, apathy, and agitation" (1973b, p. 56), and that "for many, part of the explanation was the 'burnt out' syndrome" (1973b, p. 56). This passage seems to show that the term



was starting to be used by different people, something which will be confirmed by the following quotation from the best-known article of 1974a: "Some years ago, a few of us who had been working intensively in the free clinic movement began to talk of a concept which we referred to as 'burn-out'" (1974a, p. 159). It is also important to add that, according to Schaufeli and others (2009), "burnout" was an expression used in the illicit drug scene and "colloquially referred to the devastating effect of chronic drug abuse" (p. 205).

This shows that Freudenberger did not consider himself the author or creator of the burn-out term (now written with the verb in the present tense and with a hyphen). This expression appears as a collective creation of the community of workers engaged in the Free Clinic movement, an anonymous and popular creation that does not have a certain origin or author, but which became part of the vocabulary of these people to account for an experience that had been sufficiently observed to deserve receiving a denomination.

Metaphors that organize the concept of burnout

In 1973, Freudenberger's assertions about the syndrome were extremely concise, occupying only a paragraph of a section of problems found in the clinics, within a text whose main goal was to promote and talk about the Free clinic movement. The tone of some advice given by Freudenberger is striking because it can be interpreted as promoting fatigue and not denouncing or preventing it: "Spend all the time you can spare – and some you cannot" (1973b, p. 61) and "be prepared to work long hours for no pay" (1973b, p. 61). These statements seem significant in the way he viewed work in the clinic, and was perhaps shared by other Free Clinic workers.

One paper was acknowledged by the literature as an especially important moment for the introduction of the concept of burnout as an object of academic study: "*Staff Burn-out*" (Freudenberger, 1974a). This statement can be supported by the fact that the literature in this field of research regularly highlights the importance of this particular text (Friberg, 2009; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017; Hoffarth, 2016, 2017; Muheim, 2013; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Schaufeli and others, 2009). This can also be perceived in quantitative terms by observing the number of citations that the article has and comparing it with other articles by Freudenberger. While "*Staff Burn-out*" has 9,013 citations, the paper that comes second in number of citations is "*The staff burn-out syndrome in alternative institutions*" (1975), which appeared only a year later, with 1,205 citations. Other articles on burnout, written by Freudenberger in



the 1980s, had fewer quotations: 147 for "Issues of staff burnout in therapeutic communities" (1986) and 76 for "Burnout: past, present and future concerns" (1989)¹.

The 1974a article is found in a special number of the *Journal of Social Issues* dedicated to the topic of Free Clinics and edited by Herbert J. Freudenberger himself, who also wrote the introduction (1974b). In this introduction, he refers to the special number as a Handbook, and claims to have tried to address as many general and specific, practical, and theoretical issues as possible to assist the reader and the Free Clinic movement to keep striving for "health care as a right for all, not a privilege for just a few" (1974b, p. 7). The article on burn-out has only three references, all of them of Freudenberger's own works. To quote only himself is a practice quite common in his papers (1970, 1971a, 1973a, 1974c, 1975, 1977), with one case in which he even makes no references at all (1973c). This can be interpreted as a sign of poor scholarship, but also as the consequence of advancing new, yet undiscussed ideas – in this case, both explanations are probably true.

The very definition of burn-out is taken from a dictionary that does not appear in the references: "to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (1974a, p. 159). The same definition can also be found in Freudenberger (1977) and in Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998), also without the exact reference of the dictionary being quoted – in fact, it is only referred to, in all three occasions, as "the dictionary".

Following the rationale of the 1974a paper, the text proclaims that one of the preliminary signs of burn-out is the loss of the leader's charisma and the disappointment of the clinic staff, who often has high expectations on the founder. Here it is important to remind the reader that Freudenberger was the founder of a free clinic and that this work context is central to his initial reflections on the matter.

Although the word "syndrome" does not appear in the 1974a article - as it had in 1973b - the syndrome idea can be observed when Freudenberger proposes a list of signs that are divided into physical and behavioral. Physical signs are: "a feeling of exhaustion and fatigue, being unable to shake a lingering cold, suffering from frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disturbances, sleeplessness and shortness of breath" (Freudenberger, 1974a, p. 160). Behavioral signs involve difficulty to hold in feelings, instantaneous irritation and frustration responses, and quickness to anger. Other signs are the attitude of suspicion and paranoia, in which the victim may feel that everyone wants to harm him/her, as well as a feeling of

¹ Citation figures retrieved from Google Scholar (January 30, 2020).



omnipotence, which can lead the individual to take unnecessary risks. The person becomes rigid, stubborn and inflexible, having the feeling that he/she has gone through everything in the clinic and knows more than anyone else. The person acts and seems depressed, spending a lot of time in the clinic.

After reading the description above, one question remains: why did Freudenberger chose to speak of this phenomenon in terms of syndrome? Did the medical clinic context influenced in this direction? The import of a medical term to speak of the described psychological/behavioral phenomenon is a decision that is not self-evident and which carries serious consequences for the future of the psychological object known as burnout. "Burnout is a syndrome" is a statement that will become customary in the literature about the subject and that appears in 1973 without a clear justification.

What seems to be at stake is that Freudenberger proposes to think of burn-out "as if" it was a syndrome, that is, he provides a metaphor from which it is possible to organize a discourse on causes, signs, treatment. However, this is not a metaphor that is thought of as such, but instead comes as a statement about which there is no doubt. Here we see the making of a myth, in the sense given to this word by Leary (1987): to take an analogy or metaphor as an identity, forgetting to say "as if". That is, we go from "burnout can be seen as if it were a syndrome" to "burnout is a syndrome".

Another metaphor used by Freudenberger is that of man as an energy system, whose level may be high or low, that spends energy or "recharges" its batteries. An individual who is potentially at risk of developing burnout is someone who needs to overgive and expend energy. As the population to be cared for has many needs and demands, the individual who wants to help can do this in excess. "If we don't get feeding from somewhere, we will most assuredly burn out" (1974a, p. 162). Supplies may seem endless, but they are not, they can dry up (Freudenberger, 1975, p. 75).

Stating preventive measures, Freudenberger suggests that it is a good idea to check the "energy level" of the volunteer who wants to work in the clinic because, if his energy level is low, it may be better to advise him not to work in an institution that is "such an energy drainer" (1974a, p. 163). Getting workers to do workshops and trainings is a very good way to get them to rest and "recharging their depleted batteries" (1974a, p. 164). Freudenberger (1974a) explains that the exhaustion of burnout is mental and emotional, but not physical: "It is this type of exhaustion that will not let you sleep" (p. 164). Therefore, the recommendation is to do physical exercises that leave the individual physically exhausted, but recovered from mental strain and fatigue.



Freudenberger remained true to the metaphor when he dealt with the theme of burnout in another context, that of caregivers of children in orphanages and shelters. Caregivers may not realize that “as they day-in-and-day-out psychically ‘feed’ the needy young person, they day-in-and-day-out deplete themselves” (1977, p. 92). The process is intensified if the child is emotionally needy and hungry, what makes him warn about the “inherent dangers that exist in the treatment relationship” (1977, p. 92). Living in the context of a difficult childhood experience, “the young boy or girl seeks to receive, to take, to grab whatever is available (...) the ‘gimmes’ may get out of hand” (1977, p. 93). The population assisted by various aid institutions is characterized by phrases such as “they continually take, suck, demand” (1975, p. 75). If the worker has difficulty leaving work “in the office” and takes it home, concern with the children may “severely drain his energies and intrude on all aspects of his personal life and relationships” (1977, p. 94).

In order to protect the workers from these dangers, Freudenberger stresses the importance of trusting and sharing information with the staff: these interactions “feed” the workers and allow them to “feed” clients (1977, p. 96). Energy investment at work needs to be balanced with a life outside of it (1977, p. 97) and “any activity that is physical may replenish the mental and emotional energy that are expended as part of the work” (1977, p. 97).

Individual intrapsychological dynamics, institutions and society

The description of burnout that Freudenberger provides explores the motivation and personal characteristics of the caregiver. Those who are dedicated and committed tend to be the people who will burnout: “We feel a pressure from within to work and help and we feel a pressure from the outside to give” (1974a, p. 161). This statement may translate the feelings of the workers: “Our own needs and wants are usually secondary. Theirs are primary” (1975, p. 75). The individual in danger of burnout has an excessive need to give that is not realistic. Failing to meet his own high expectations, he starts to feel guilty, and this can lead to even more work. Another factor to consider is what kind of commitment the person has with work. Engagement and commitment can either be mature or just a sign of a personal need to be accepted and receive approval from others (1974a).

According to Freudenberger, different types of people are prone to burnout. The overly committed uses the clinic as a substitute for his personal life: all his gratifications in life come from the institution, and even in his free time he wants to go to the clinic. His identification with the institution is so great that any attack



on his person is an attack on the institution and vice versa. The authoritarian needs to be always in control and believes that no one can do the job as well as he does. The administrator may be someone who is unable to delegate.

While addressing the psychology of child caregivers (1977), Freudenberger points out that the caregivers themselves may have come from the streets or from unstructured homes, which may explain why “their motivation may be very strong to help fellow sufferers who have come from the same place they did” (1977, p. 91). The caregiver who came from the street may be identifying with the child he helps through his own unresolved personal experiences and problems.

These thoughts may be related to the life story of Freudenberger, who went through difficult times on the streets during his childhood, fleeing from Nazi Germany, and passing through several countries until arriving in New York (Gold Medal Award for life achievement in the practice of psychology, 1999, Canter & Freudenberger, 2001). In fact, there are many elements that support this idea. The text that registers his award at an American Psychology Association (APA) ceremony reads as follows: “He speaks of his involvement in psychology and his work with patients and addicts as a way of giving back to people when he so often thought that he would not survive” (Gold Medal Award for life achievement in the practice of psychology, 1999, p. 579). Freudenberger showed a continuous interest in topics related to childhood and adolescence in difficult situations (Freudenberger & Torkelsen, 1984; Freudenberger & Gallagher, 1995), and has directly related his interest in the subject with personal experiences on at least two occasions (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Freudenberger & Gallagher, 1995).

The feelings of the caregiver are analyzed by Freudenberger through the concepts of transference (1974c) and countertransference (1977). For example, when talking about therapeutic counseling: the practitioner can transfer to the patient what he has experienced as a child, or how he would have liked to be treated as a child (1974c). He can even give his personal phone number, meet with the patient in the weekend, take him to a job interview, get him an apartment, etc. A relationship of dependency between them can be established, the professional may feel compelled to take care of all the problems, and start to burnout (1974c).

Despite this focus on the caregiver's intrapsychological dynamics, Freudenberger established a relationship between burnout and the wider political and social struggle in which he placed the action of free clinics. Practicing psychological counseling, either individually or in groups, “without being able to effect change in the immediate surrounding community, can be a frustrating task indeed. It is like doing band-aid treatment when major surgery is called for” (1974c,



p. 85; see also the use of the same metaphor in 1973b). Doing only counseling “is merely to attend to the symptoms of the disease, rather than tackle the causes” (1974c, p. 86). That is why “we need to be as much concerned with making our sick institutions healthier, as with making individuals, who come to us for help, healthier” (1974c, p. 86). How does all this relate to burnout? “Without putting our energies in those directions [of institutional and communal change], there will never be enough counselors to go around. As fast as we turn them out, we ourselves will burn them out” (1974c, p. 86).

Another passage where this preoccupation with supra-individual aspects can be seen is in the proposition of the notion of functional Burn-Out. For Freudenberger, work in large organizations can become fragmented and meaningless. The worker might find himself in a situation where he cannot communicate with the decision makers in the company. In this case, the worker can be lead to a functional Burn-Out, that is, a Burn-Out generated by the system itself (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 164). He examines a case of group Burn-Out in which a whole team of seven people works hard for a candidate who uses the results of that work in a timely manner to be elected, but then ignores the project after coming to power (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 172).

Continuing in the perspective of a wider questioning of society, Freudenberger states: “Why, as a nation, do we seem, both collectively and individually, to be in the throes of a fast-spreading phenomenon – burn-out?” (1980, p. 3). Elsewhere in the same book, we see that the metaphor is related to an ecological concern, taking into account the possibility of a global burn-out: “Burn-Out of the planet’s energy and resources” (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 200)².

A concept in motion

Freudenberger continued to mention burnout in later articles that did not focused on this topic (Freudenberger & Torkelsen, 1984, Freudenberger and others, 1989, Freudenberger, 1990, 1993), but it is in the books of 1980 and 1986 that he makes some of his most elaborated theoretical contributions after the pioneering papers of the 1970s. These two books (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Freudenberger & North, 1986) are characterized by a large number of clinical histories, by the style of self-help literature, and by frequent interaction

² This aspect of Freudenberger's thinking was taken up more recently by Chabot (2013): “burn-out is a disease of civilization. We have exhausted the earth” (p.13). “Burn-out is the mirror of society that makes it possible” (p. 62). In the French original text: “Le burn-out est une maladie de civilisation. Nous épuisons la terre” (p. 13). “Le burn-out est le miroir de la société qui le rend possible” (p. 62).



with the reader, such as 1) the Burn-Out scale (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 17); 2) an exercise in self-reflection and self-awareness aimed at discovering infantile messages and defenses (1980, p. 30-32), and 3) a checklist for prevention and recovery of burnout (Freudenberger & North 1986, p. 232).

The first book, *"Burn-Out: the high cost of high achievement"*, gives the following definition of the phenomenon: "To deplete oneself. To exhaust one's physical and mental resources. To wear oneself out by excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by oneself or by the values of society" (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 16). This definition not only does not use the word syndrome, but it also does not provide a list of "signs". It should be noticed that there is not a necessary relationship with work, and the example used just a few pages after this definition is a Burn-Out of a marriage. The focus is on the energetic aspect of exhaustion and how it happens, that is, the dynamics that leads to exhaustion. This dynamic is described as the conflict between one person's idealized image of himself and a real, imperfect image that is denied. Burn-Out is described primarily as the result of this denial, and healing happens through a process of awareness and integration of the denied part. It is surprising that Freud is not cited even once³, and that there is no use of the terms "suppression" or "repression". Further on, a list of "symptoms" (not signs) is provided: exhaustion, detachment, boredom and cynicism, impatience and heightened irritability, a sense of omnipotence, a suspicion of being unappreciated, paranoia, disorientation, psychosomatic complaints, depression and denial of feelings. (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. 62-67). Among these symptoms, it is the denial mechanism that will receive the most detailed analysis, and it becomes clear that it is thought of as a Freudian defense mechanism that can be a drain of energy, insofar as denial is used to maintain a false image, whose origin is usually found in childhood and family relations.

In the second book – *"Women's Burnout"* – the definition given to burnout confirms the focus on the energy aspect as the central component of the concept and more explicitly covers different contexts of application: "It is an exhaustion born of excessive demands which may be self-imposed or externally imposed by families, jobs, friends, lovers, value systems, or society, which deplete one's energy" (Freudenberger & North, 1986, p. 9). In the 1980 book, the denial process already had greater significance than the other symptoms. But in 1986, it will be raised to the central mechanism of burnout: "If you think you're burning out, you can be certain you've assumed the posture of denial in critical areas of your life"

³ In the references list the reader can find Freudenberger himself, Christina Maslach and other 1970s authors who wrote about stress and burnout.



(Freudenberger & North, 1986, p. 10). The symptoms are now presented as a 12-stage cycle: the compulsion to prove, intensity, subtle deprivations, dismissal of conflict and needs, distortion of values, heightened denial, disengagement, observable behavioral changes, depersonalization, emptiness, depression and total burnout exhaustion. Comparing these items with the “signs” of 1974a, the abandonment of the more psychosomatic or corporeal aspects is evident, and a greater elaboration of the more properly psychological aspects is presented. Burnout appears as a compensation movement, responding to a time of great initial deprivation. It is indiscriminate, since “it feeds on starvation of any kind” (Freudenberger & North, 1986, p. 146-147). When love, recognition and approval are not present, “they leave a hungry void” (Freudenberger & North, 1986, p. 90), and low self-esteem drives a non-realistic quest for excellence, recognition and approval (Freudenberger & North, 1986, p. 17).

Examining the metaphors

We have identified two main metaphors that structure the concept: burnout as a syndrome and man as an energy system. When we compare the presence of these metaphors with the conceptual variations suffered, what stands out is that the metaphors are more stable than the definitions and components of burnout.

However, the two identified metaphors do not have the same status. Given that every metaphor has consequences, we can discuss and evaluate them. Gaete and Cornejo (2014) propose the following criteria: 1) do they foster productive and meaningful reasoning to advance knowledge in a given context? (productivity criterion); 2) are they consistent with the assumptions and theoretical framework in which they are embedded? (consistency criterion).

In fact, the first metaphor (burnout as a syndrome) seems fragile and not essential since Freudenberger himself soon ceases to use the word “syndrome” and proposes definitions that do not include the term (recent criticism on the subject can be found in Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017; Millan, 2007; Rollo, 2017). This metaphor places “burnout” in a medical vocabulary and frame of reference, without presenting elements to support this, since the psychoanalytic intrapsychological dynamics studied by Freudenberger does not need the notion of syndrome to state what it does. Moreover, it promises a stability of signs and symptoms that was never found and tends to individualize and medicalize the treatment (through psychotherapy and drug administration). Moreover, it is not able to deliver an etiological agent to a problem that is admittedly multi-factor and involves many psychosocial determinants. In this case, the metaphor not only does



not enhances our knowledge about the phenomenon, but it actually has harmful consequences. The main outcome of these remarks is that the syndrome metaphor has too many problems and difficulties to justify itself theoretically, and should be abandoned.

On the other hand, the metaphor of man as an energy system seems to be at the core of the burnout concept. It can be seen at various moments and constitutes a central vocabulary: energy level, energy drainer, to recharge to feed, etc. Signs and symptoms are severely questioned and criticized, but there seems to be no doubt, among those who believe that burnout is a useful concept, that exhaustion is its central aspect, and it is generally conceived in energetic terms. In this case, the energetic metaphor seems to have had special resonance for two reasons: 1) it expressed a suffering that demanded a name, recognition and treatment; 2) it did it in a language that is both easily understandable and open, so that anyone could interpret it, giving meaning to the metaphor in a personal way. Thus, it can be argued that the energetic metaphor is productive, even if its openness carries the risk of turning it useless to scientific purpose. It is also consistent with the psychoanalytical framework of reference, since it can be seen as anchored in the Freudian concept of libido.

Conclusion

The main results will be summarized by section. "The emergence of the burnout concept" shows the importance of Freudenberger's personal experience of suffering and the anchoring of burnout in the collective experience of the free clinic movement, where the expression was already in use. "Metaphors that organize the concept of burnout" identifies two main metaphors as central to the making of this psychological object: "burnout is a syndrome" and "man is an energy system". "Individual intrapsychological dynamics, institutions and society" provides an account of Freudenberger's initial analysis of the inner psychology of the individual with burnout, while recognizing that he also pointed at the importance of groups, institutions and society, even if these broader topics were not as well developed. "A concept in motion" discusses how his views evolve to a more detailed psychoanalytical-oriented frame of comprehension in the books "Burn-Out: the high cost of high achievement" and "Woman's burnout". In the end, "Examining the metaphors" argues that the syndrome metaphor is not consistent and has harmful consequences to the way we deal with the subject, while the energy system metaphor is at the core of the burnout concept.



The present study has at least two important limitations that may suggest further research. The first one is that we only had access to a limited portion of Freudenberger's published work, and did not had the opportunity to consult the "Herbert Freudenberger papers" archive in the Center for the History of Psychology, located at the University of Akron. This means that the comprehension of Freudenberger's work can be significantly changed by a more extensive knowledge of these bibliographical and archival sources. The second limitation is that we emphasized a theoretical and internalist investigation of one single author. As argued by Waitrin (2017), internalist and externalist approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary. Therefore, the comparison of Freudenberger with other researchers, the history and meaning of the word "syndrome", as well as the investigation of broader sociological and historical aspects of Psychology, Psychiatry and the classification of mental disorders in the USA of the 1970s and 1980s are possibilities that could enhance our knowledge about the development of burnout.

It is rather surprising that recent history of psychological research can be little known, as we can see in the case of Herbert Freudenberger's work. While citing the 1974a article has become practically a ritualistic procedure in the burnout literature, Freudenberger as a psychoanalyst seems to have found only oblivion. Thus the importance of historical studies that try to analyze the development of scientific concepts, unveiling epistemological, methodological and theoretical assumptions. The choices made in the metaphorical construction of the burnout syndrome are not mandatory and their analysis can bring many different challenges to the surface.

Why did a psychosocial phenomenon became ruled by a metaphor that induces individual treatment? Are we ready to recognize psychological suffering that is not medically framed? At the end of this review, it is possible to conclude that the past of burnout as a concept can help us question its present usage and maybe even change the course of its development.

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Data de recebimento: 30 de janeiro de 2020

Data de aceite: 08 de agosto de 2020