

**DOCTOR'S THESES**

Edit Nagy

**THE STUDY OF A  
COUNSELLING PROFESSION CAREER PATH  
WITH REGARD TO BURNOUT**

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## 1. The phenomenon and the aim of this research

In recent years the stress overload in counselling jobs is often described with the term burnout syndrome, which occurs when professionals working with medical patients, the homeless, the dying, the handicapped or the mentally retarded, defined as *clients* in literature, cannot cope with psychological effects of their work, which later cause mental anomalies in them.

The effects of overwork in counselling jobs, and the vague line between private and professional lives or the merging of the two, present several problems, and are the main cause of mental distress. Background studies of burnout deal with resignation as a source for burnout, the leaving of the profession by qualified professionals, the frequent occurrence of psychiatric morbidity, depression, addictions, and psychosomatic symptoms among them. The percentage of committing suicide is especially high in psychiatric fields among all medical professions.

Counselling is a basic, ancient category in human interactions. The trend in our time is that most women, in taking care of their families on one hand, or by doing counselling jobs on the other hand, practise some form of this ancient function. Traditional social expectations have established an ambiguous motivation in women to fulfil all kinds of requirements. If these requirements become a determinative norm of their lives, sooner or later they will show the signs of overload.

Freudenberger described the burnout syndrome in 1974, and Schmidbauer started a psychoanalytic research of the *Helfer* syndrome in 1977. In general, we can say that it were mostly American and Anglo-Saxon scientists who paid attention to the phenomenon of burnout. Studies show that those who start their careers with too much idealism, are often already at serious risk in the first few of their working years. Those emotionally involved with their work are the most endangered. These are medical workers, educators, social workers, deacons and ecclesiastical workers, clerics, and psychiatrists. Even more endangered are those before retirement in these fields of work. This syndrome does not only appear in individuals, but also within entire work teams in a collective form.

The basic *aim* of our research is to describe the career expectations and career choice of *correspondence course students of qualified nursing*, the main characteristics of

counselling workers, their sociological and psychological dispositions, and the syndrome caused in them by *work stress overload*, the burnout syndrome.

## 2. Research methods

This study can be divided into two main sections. The first part explores Hungarian and international literature on burnout, the second section presents empirical studies of the syndrome.

Topics included in our research: analyzing career choices, defining individual personality prototypes, measuring the degree of burnout along three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, personal performance and depersonalization; and finally, demographic-sociological characteristics of these individuals and questions related to career choice and work routines.

We worked with the following *hypotheses*:

- Correspondence students are a heterogeneous group, considering their age, their years already spent working in healthcare – as a result of early employment –, and their previous qualifications. These, and the previously described theoretical bases suggest that *some of these students are already in different states of the burnout syndrome*.
- *Higher education* and obtaining a diploma can help these people get out of the hard three-shift system of working hours, and maybe get a higher position. *Gaining a qualification can mean a step up the professional hierarchy of nursing, which is a job with lower social status, and is therefore a mental burden in itself*.
- We suspect that their typical personality is the “Heimchen” type and we think their main motivation behind career choice is *altruism*.

Altogether, we can say that obtaining a diploma can (at least for now) help establish a long-term nursing career, develop a healthy professional performance, and avoid emotional exhaustion and psychosomatic symptoms, but initial symptoms of the burnout syndrome can already show – according to the time spent in their profession – in correspondence course students of qualified nursing.

*Research methods:*

*Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) test:* A questionnaire with 22 statements, validated in Hungary by Szilvia Ádám, Zsuzsa Györffy and Csilla Csoboth, who also defined standard levels with the permission of the author, Christina Maslach.

*Super's workrate form,* which contains 45 factors in 15 groups. Adapted to Hungarian in 1968 by György Csepeli and Péter Somlai.

*Schoenaker's typology test,* compiled in 1984, a scale of 28 items; our research used an adaptation by Mária Szuhányi.

*Background and professional motivation questionnaire* with 80 questions on demographics, sociological aspects, career choice and work routines, lifestyle, overall health and recreation.

#### *Sample and analysis*

To prove our hypothesis, as well as analyzing relevant literature, we chose to study correspondence course students, who are older than regular students, with more or less practise in nursing. My sample population was the students of 1996-2000 at the Nyíregyháza College of Medical Studies faculty of the University of Debrecen. There were altogether 342 students in the four years of the above mentioned course. I had the opportunity to involve almost every one of them, meaning that I had 317 tests and questionnaires filled out. Rejection was minimal (4 persons). The rest of the students who did not take part in my research were the ones who, for different reasons, broke off their studies. There are 5 men and 312 women in this group, which reflects the high percentage of women working in this field. The wide range of their age, from 19 to 50, shows that the group is very heterogeneous. We used descriptive statistical analyses, grouping our sample according to different aspects. We studied the social, demographic and professional background questions with factor analysis. Data was processed using SPSS for Windows 12.0 statistics software.

In our opinion, *results can be utilized* in two main areas. They can contribute to the renewal of college training curricula for qualified nursing, so that more space would be allowed for personality development and burnout-prevention trainings. They can also help hospitals' human resources management by giving them aspects for recruitment and training, especially in departments where patient mortality rates are high, so they can develop their

own burnout-prevention programmes for all fields where necessary, thus preventing nurses from leaving their profession.

The issues examined in our research are topical on both national and international level, and can therefore help resolve questions concerning the career path of certain professions, for example nursing.