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FUNCTIONAL BURNOUT VS. CLINICAL BURNOUT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINED PERFORMANCE UNDER CONDITIONS OF EXHAUSTION

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The article advances a conceptual extension of the burnout phenomenon by introducing a distinction between clinical burnout and functional burnout in the context of contemporary transformations in the organizational environment. While clinical burnout is well documented and associated with performance deterioration, functional burnout describes a latent form of exhaustion in which performance is maintained through compensatory psychological mechanisms. The paper employs an integrative theoretical analysis of the literature in occupational health psychology, stress theory, and self-regulation theory. The central argument is that classical burnout models are insufficient to explain this emerging form, leading to an underestimation of psychosocial risks in modern organizations. The analysis highlights the role of excessive self-regulation, emotional dissonance, and internalized organizational performance norms in sustaining performance under conditions of exhaustion. The article concludes that functional burnout requires a reconceptualization of the relationship between performance and occupational health and opens avenues for the development of more sensitive diagnostic frameworks.

Keywords: *functional burnout, clinical burnout, sustainable performance, compensatory performance, self-regulation, emotional dissonance, occupational health, occupational stress.*

BURNOUT FUNCȚIONAL VS. BURNOUT CLINIC: O ANALIZĂ PSIHOLÓGICĂ A PERFORMANȚEI MENȚINUTE ÎN CONDIȚII DE EPUIZARE

Articolul dat prezintă o extindere conceptuală a fenomenului burnout prin delimitarea între burnout clinic și burnout funcțional, în contextul schimbărilor actuale ale mediului organizațional. În timp ce burnout-ul clinic este bine documentat și asociat cu deteriorarea performanței, burnout-ul funcțional descrie o formă latentă de epuizare în care performanța este menținută prin mecanisme psihologice compensatorii. Articolul face referire la o analiză teoretică integrativă a literaturii din psihologia sănătății ocupaționale, teoria stresului și teoria autoreglării. Argumentul central susține că modelele clasice de burnout sunt insuficiente pentru a explica această formă emergentă, ceea ce conduce la subestimarea riscurilor psihosociale în organizațiile moderne. Se evidențiază rolul autoreglării excesive, disonanței emoționale și normelor organizaționale internalizate în menținerea performanței în condiții de epuizare. Se concluzionează că burnout-ul funcțional necesită o reconceptualizare a relației dintre performanță și sănătate ocupațională și deschide direcții pentru dezvoltarea unor modele diagnostice mai sensibile.

Cuvinte-cheie: *burnout funcțional, burnout clinic, performanță sustenabilă, performanță compensatorie, autoreglare, disonanță emoțională, sănătate ocupațională, stres ocupațional.*

Introduction

Burnout is widely regarded as one of the most extensively investigated phenomena in occupational health psychology, conceptualized as a syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to chronic job-related stressors and characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy [15, 16]. Theoretical advances over recent decades have been supported by robust explanatory frameworks such as the Job Demands–Resources model [4] and Conservation of Resources theory [9], which conceptualize burnout as an outcome of imbalance between environmental demands and available psychological resources. Despite these developments, the existing literature continues to focus mainly on the manifest forms of burnout, where functional impairments are visible and can be measured [20]. In most assessment instruments and empirical studies, burnout is treated as being directly linked to reduced performance, psychological disengagement, and lower organizational involvement [17].

This perspective implicitly assumes a relatively direct relationship between psychological exhaustion and professional performance—a relationship that is only rarely examined critically. Contemporary organizational dynamics suggest a more complex reality. In environments characterized by high performance pressure, intense competition, and the internalization of performance norms, individuals are increasingly observed to sustain high levels of performance despite significant psychological exhaustion [21]. This pattern of functioning is supported by mechanisms such as intensive self-regulation, emotional labor, and identity investment in the professional role [6, 1].

Within this context, a promising research direction is emerging, although it remains underdeveloped. While the literature acknowledges the psychological costs associated with sustained high performance, these processes are often addressed only indirectly and in a fragmented way. In particular, a form of burnout characterized by the maintenance of performance has not yet been clearly defined. As a result, current studies offer only partial explanations for situations in which psychological exhaustion does not lead to a decline in performance, but is instead masked or compensated through adaptive mechanisms.

This state of affairs points to limitations in existing approaches. Conceptually, prevailing models primarily capture manifest expressions of burnout and are less sensitive to latent or less visible forms of exhaustion. In practice, organizational systems often struggle to identify employees at risk, as performance is frequently used as a proxy for occupational health.

In this framework, the present article advances the theoretical field by introducing a conceptual distinction between **clinical burnout**, characterized by observable dysfunction, and **functional burnout**, defined by sustained performance under conditions of compensated psychological exhaustion. This distinction enables a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between performance and occupational health. It contributes to the development of analytical models and assessment tools that are more sensitive to the internal dynamics of professional adaptation.

Results and Discussion

Limitations of Classical Burnout Conceptualization.

Dominant theoretical models of burnout, particularly the three-dimensional framework proposed by Maslach and the Job Demands–Resources model, have substantially contributed to advancing the understanding of the relationship between occupational stress and exhaustion [15, 4]. These frameworks conceptualize burnout as the outcome of an imbalance between job demands and the individual's available resources, highlighting the important role of both organizational and psychological factors in shaping the development and persistence of the phenomenon [9]. A closer examination suggests that these models are primarily oriented toward contexts in which psychological exhaustion is accompanied by observable changes in professional performance. While this perspective has provided valuable insights, it may not fully encompass the range of ways in which burnout can manifest in contemporary organizational environments. In practice, it is not uncommon for individuals to maintain relatively high levels of professional functioning despite experiencing significant psychological exhaustion. This pattern of functioning indicates a more nuanced relationship between external performance and internal experience, suggesting that certain dimensions of burnout may be less readily captured by traditional performance-based indicators.

Clinical Burnout vs. Functional Burnout: A Difference in Psychological Organization.

The distinction between clinical burnout and functional burnout cannot be reduced to a difference in intensity; rather, it reflects different modes of organizing the psychological response to stress.

Clinical burnout is marked by the failure of adaptive mechanisms, which is reflected in lower professional engagement, diminished performance, and the appearance of psychosomatic symptoms. In this condition, exhaustion becomes observable and is acknowledged both at the individual and organizational level [20].

In contrast, functional burnout involves the maintenance of performance through the intensive activation of self-regulatory mechanisms. The individual remains engaged, effective, and apparently well-adapted; however, this balance is sustained through increased psychological effort. Thus, functional burnout can be conceptualized as a form of maladaptive adaptation, in which external functioning is preserved at the expense of internal equilibrium [9, 8]. This perspective suggests that functional burnout should not be con-

sidered a “milder” form of burnout. Instead, it may be more difficult to detect. It can also be associated with higher long-term risks. This is due to its latent nature. [20, 5].

Excessive Self-Regulation as a Central Mechanism.

One of the fundamental psychological mechanisms involved in functional burnout is excessive self-regulation. Self-regulation refers to the individual’s capacity to control emotions, cognitions, and behaviors in order to achieve goals [2]. It is generally regarded as an essential adaptive factor for performance and effective functioning.

However, the literature indicates that self-regulatory resources are limited and may be depleted over time, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “ego depletion” [2]. Under chronic stress, the continuous mobilization of these resources leads to a gradual deterioration in self-regulatory capacity and the emergence of exhaustion.

In functional burnout, the individual compensates for high demands through sustained self-control efforts, which enable short-term performance maintenance but generate an internal imbalance in the long term [2, 7]. This mode of functioning is often reinforced at the organizational level, contributing to its persistence.

Emotional Dissonance and Hidden Psychological Costs.

Emotional dissonance represents another central mechanism in functional burnout and refers to the incongruence between experienced and expressed emotions. In organizational environments, employees are frequently required to display emotional behaviors that align with professional norms, regardless of their internal state.

This incongruence entails additional emotional regulation effort and is associated with increased levels of exhaustion and reduced psychological authenticity [6]. Over time, maintaining such dissonance leads to emotional alienation and a diminished sense of internal coherence [1].

In functional burnout, emotional dissonance becomes a stable adaptive strategy, supporting the maintenance of performance while simultaneously amplifying psychological costs.

Performance as a Defensive Mechanism.

An aspect that remains insufficiently explored in the classical burnout literature concerns the defensive function of performance. Traditionally, performance has been interpreted as the outcome of competence, motivation, and professional engagement [15, 20]. However, in contexts characterized by chronic occupational stress and heightened normative pressure, performance may acquire an additional function—that of a psychological protection mechanism, consistent with contemporary theories of stress and adaptation.

From an integrative perspective, performance can be conceptualized not only as a behavioral output but also as a strategy of internal regulation. The literature on self-regulation and emotion regulation suggests that individuals may rely on goal-directed behaviors to maintain psychological stability under conditions of stress [2, 7]. In this sense, maintaining a high level of performance may contribute to avoiding confrontation with states of psychological vulnerability, such as exhaustion, anxiety, or feelings of inadequacy. Thus, performance becomes a “functional screen” that masks internal dysfunctions and enables the individual to preserve a coherent sense of self and professional functioning [1].

First, performance may operate as an **avoidance mechanism**. In conditions of incipient exhaustion, intensive engagement in professional tasks reduces cognitive and emotional availability for self-reflection. Continuous activity and a strong focus on results function as a form of distraction, limiting conscious access to internal signals of fatigue or imbalance. This form of avoidant coping is well documented in the stress and self-regulation literature, which highlights the role of task-oriented behaviors in the temporary reduction of psychological discomfort [2, 12].

Second, performance fulfills an identity-validation role. In many organizational settings, professional identity is closely tied to achieved results, and performance becomes a key standard for self-evaluation [1]. In cases of functional burnout, this dynamic becomes even stronger. Individuals continue to perform not only in response to external demands, but also to prevent a mismatch between their self-perception (as competent and effective) and their internal state (feeling exhausted and overburdened). Research on emotional labor and professional identity indicates that maintaining consistency between identity and behavior is a strong motivator of organizational action, even when it involves considerable psychological strain. [6, 1].

Third, performance may function as a mechanism for **maintaining psychological control**. In situations characterized by uncertainty, pressure, or ambiguity, achieving professional goals provides individuals with a sense of predictability and control, an aspect emphasized in cognitive stress theory [12]. Even when other dimensions of experience (emotional or personal) become unstable, professional performance remains a domain in which individuals perceive themselves as capable of acting effectively. This perception contributes to maintaining an apparent psychological equilibrium, although it involves increased consumption of self-regulatory resources [2].

From this perspective, performance in functional burnout cannot be seen only as an indicator of optimal functioning. It should be analyzed in relation to the individual's internal dynamics. It may reflect competence. At the same time, it can also indicate intensive compensatory effort. This aligns with contemporary perspectives on the relationship between resources and occupational stress. [9, 8].

This reinterpretation has important theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, it suggests the need to integrate identity-related, emotional, and defensive dimensions into burnout models, moving beyond exclusively behavioral approaches [20, 13]. At the practical level, it indicates that the assessment of occupational health cannot rely solely on performance indicators, but must also incorporate measures of internal psychological states, such as emotional exhaustion and emotional dissonance [6, 7].

Thus, within the context of functional burnout, performance should be understood as a complex coping strategy that, while effective in the short term, may contribute to the maintenance and amplification of exhaustion over the long term, in accordance with theoretical models of progressive resource depletion [9].

Organizational Implications: The Vulnerable High Performer Paradox.

Functional burnout gives rise to a significant organizational paradox: employees who are consistently evaluated as “high performers” may simultaneously be those most exposed to psychological risks. This incongruence stems from the fact that visible performance can mask substantial internal costs, while organizational systems tend to rely primarily on behavioral and outcome-based indicators that are insufficient to capture the internal dynamics of exhaustion [8].

First, such employees are less likely to seek support. A professional identity centered on competence and efficiency reduces the likelihood of acknowledging vulnerability or requesting assistance. Moreover, organizational norms may implicitly discourage the expression of difficulties, particularly in roles associated with high responsibility. As a result, a pattern of apparent self-sufficiency emerges, in which genuine needs remain unexpressed, and exhaustion progresses without intervention [1]. Second, high performers are less easily identified by organizational systems as being at risk. Traditional evaluation tools, such as KPIs, productivity metrics, and deadline compliance, do not capture subtle signs of psychological strain. These include emotional dissonance, rigid self-regulation, and reduced recovery capacity. As a result, early detection methods, such as pulse surveys and periodic assessments, may fail to identify individuals at latent risk. This is because high performance scores can mask early warning signs. [6]. Third, these employees are more vulnerable to overload. Organizational task allocation practices often favor redistributing workload toward those who consistently deliver results. This “principle of rewarded competence” leads to the progressive accumulation of responsibilities, role expansion, and increased task complexity. In the absence of protective mechanisms, performance becomes a predictor of overload rather than of sustainability [3].

These dynamics point to a structural limitation in current organizational practices—namely, the tendency to equate performance with optimal functioning. Such an assumption overlooks the possibility that performance may be sustained through compensatory effort and elevated psychological cost, in line with resource depletion frameworks [9]. Consequently, organizations risk reinforcing unsustainable patterns of functioning and delaying preventive interventions.

Reconceptualizing the Performance–Psychological Health Relationship

The findings of the present analysis highlight the need to rethink the relationship between performance and psychological well-being. This involves moving beyond the implicit assumption that high performance automatically reflects optimal functioning. In the traditional literature, performance is often used as an indirect measure of effective adaptation. This is based on the idea that individuals who meet or exceed organizational standards have sufficient psychological resources and maintain internal stability [17].

Although this assumption holds in certain contexts, it becomes insufficient in light of the complexity of contemporary organizational environments, where performance may be sustained through compensatory mechanisms associated with elevated psychological costs, in line with stress and resource-based theories [9].

In this context, it is important to distinguish between sustainable performance and compensatory performance. These represent two different modes of professional functioning. Each has different implications for occupational health [4].

Sustainable performance is characterized by the attainment of professional goals under conditions of relatively stable psychological equilibrium. It reflects a functional balance between environmental demands and individual resources, in which self-regulation remains flexible, psychological recovery is possible, and professional engagement does not result in chronic exhaustion [13]. Sustainable performance is associated with:

- a. the efficient, but not excessive, use of self-regulatory resources [2];
- b. congruence between internal experience and professional behavior [6];
- c. the capacity for recovery and replenishment of resources [9];
- d. emotional and cognitive stability over the medium and long term [7].

In contrast, **compensatory performance** is sustained through a disproportionate consumption of psychological resources, particularly self-regulation and emotional control. In this case, performance does not reflect a functional balance, but rather a continuous effort to maintain standards under conditions of internal imbalance, in line with resource depletion models [9]. This form of performance is characteristic of functional burnout and involves:

- a. excessive and rigid mobilization of self-regulatory mechanisms [2]
- b. persistent emotional dissonance [6]
- c. reduced recovery capacity [9]
- d. the progressive accumulation of stress and exhaustion [8].

The key difference between these two forms is not the level of performance itself, but the psychological cost required to maintain it. In this sense, two employees may achieve similar organizational results. However, one may operate in a sustainable way, while the other relies on compensatory mechanisms. This second pattern is associated with a higher risk of later deterioration [3].

From this perspective, functional burnout falls within the category of compensatory performance and highlights the limitations of organizational evaluations based exclusively on outcomes. Assessing performance without integrating internal psychological dimensions may lead to misjudgments and to the failure to identify occupational risks [13].

At the theoretical level, this reconceptualization implies the extension of performance models to include the dimension of psychological sustainability, in line with contemporary perspectives on emotional regulation and adaptation [7]. Performance can no longer be analyzed independently of the internal processes that sustain it, but must be understood as the result of a dynamic interplay between demands, resources, and adaptive mechanisms [9].

At the applied level, this approach entails the development of assessment tools that incorporate not only external indicators (productivity, efficiency, outcomes), but also indicators of internal states, such as: level of emotional exhaustion [17]; perceived control and personal resources [12]; degree of emotional dissonance [6]; capacity for psychological recovery [9].

Integrating these dimensions enables a more nuanced evaluation of professional functioning and facilitates the early identification of functional burnout [13].

The relationship between performance and psychological health could therefore be reinterpreted within a more complex framework, in which performance is not regarded as a sufficient indicator of adaptation, but as an outcome that may be sustained through either functional or compensatory processes. This distinction is essential for the development of organizational models oriented not only toward efficiency, but also toward psychological sustainability [9].

Conclusions

Functional burnout can be understood as a relevant extension of the current theoretical framework. It reflects complex psychological adaptations to modern organizational demands. Unlike clinical burnout, it is not marked by a reduction in performance. Instead, performance is maintained despite a high psychological cost. This form of burnout is harder to identify. It also carries greater long-term risks. It can delay timely intervention and normalize sustained overexertion.

From a *theoretical perspective*, the findings support the need to: revise classical burnout models; introduce the concept of compensatory performance; develop more nuanced psychological indicators.

From a *practical perspective*, organizations need to move beyond the “performance = health” paradigm and incorporate psychological dimensions into employee evaluation.

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