

Parental burnout around the globe: A 42-country study ^[1]

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Excerpted from abstract and introduction

Abstract

High levels of stress in the parenting domain can lead to parental burnout, a condition that has severe consequences for both parents and children. It is not yet clear, however, whether parental burnout varies by culture, and if so, why it might do so. In this study, we examined the prevalence of parental burnout in 42 countries (17,409 parents; 71% mothers; Mage = 39.20) and showed that the prevalence of parental burnout varies dramatically across countries. Analyses of cultural values revealed that individualistic cultures, in particular, displayed a noticeably higher prevalence and mean level of parental burnout. Indeed, individualism plays a larger role in parental burnout than either economic inequalities across countries, or any other individual and family characteristic examined so far, including the number and age of children and the number of hours spent with them. These results suggest that cultural values in Western countries may put parents under heightened levels of stress.

Introduction

At all times and in all cultures, the majority of adults become parents. The experience is so mundane that, for centuries, parenthood was considered deserving of little comment. However, several major sociological changes over the past few decades (including, but not limited to, the International Child Convention, 1989, and increased state regulation; Daly, 2007) have profoundly changed parenting, leading to increased parental involvement, more intensive parenting, and child overprotection and optimization (Bristow, 2014; Craig et al., 2014). It is in this zeitgeist that the notion of parental burnout has emerged—a condition characterized by intense exhaustion related to parenting, emotional distancing from one’s children, a loss of pleasure and efficacy in one’s parental role, and a contrast between previous and current parental self (Mikolajczak et al., 2019).

Recent work suggests that parental burnout can be very damaging. As regards the parents themselves, parental burnout can give rise to suicidal and escape ideations (Mikolajczak et al., 2019), which are much more frequent in parental burnout than in job burnout or even depression (Mikolajczak et al., 2020). This finding is not surprising considering that one cannot resign from one’s parenting role or be put on sick leave from one’s children. In addition to increasing the desire to physically escape from the parenting situation, parental burnout is also related to psychological forms of escape such as alcohol use (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). At the biological level, parental burnout causes a dysregulation in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (Brianda et al., 2020b), which is most likely causally involved in the somatic complaints and sleep disorders reported by burned out parents (Sarrionandia-Pena, 2019) and potentially also in the increase in child-directed violence (Martorell & Bugental, 2006; Moons et al., 2010). Indeed, in addition to affecting the parents themselves, parental burnout has serious repercussions on children by leading previously good parents (Chen et al., 2019) to become neglectful or even violent towards their offspring (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). All these effects are causal because when parental burnout is treated via a targeted psychological intervention, suicidal and escape ideations and parental violence and neglect decrease proportionally to the decrease in parental burnout, and HPA axis activity normalizes (Brianda et al., 2020).

What makes parental burnout a worrying condition is not only the gravity of its consequences but also its prevalence. Lifelong prevalence data are not available, but studies conducted in European and Anglo-Saxon countries (Belgium, France, England, and USA) have shown that an alarming number of parents have parental burnout. Conservative point prevalence estimates (Roskam et al., 2018) suggest that at least 5% of parents have burnout. However, in the absence of cross-cultural studies including non-Western countries, it is unclear whether this pattern is also evident in the rest of the world. Given that parenting norms and practices dramatically vary across cultures (Bornstein, 2013), it seems plausible that the prevalence of parental burnout would also vary substantially across the globe.

Preliminary studies conducted on parental burnout in various parts of the world (i.e., Belgium, France, The Netherlands, UK, Sweden, and Japan) suggest important variation in parental burnout prevalence (with prevalence varying between 1 and 30%, see, e.g., Kawamoto et al., 2018; Lindhal-Norberg, 2007; Lindhal-Norberg et al., 2014; Lindstrom et al., 2010; Roskam et al., 2018; Roskam et al., 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Van Bakel et al., 2018). Yet, this variation in prevalence is admittedly difficult to interpret due to variation in the instruments used to measure parental burnout, the varying cutoff scores adopted, and the different target populations (e.g., community

samples versus parents with severely ill children). It therefore remains unclear (i) whether the prevalence of parental burnout varies across the globe and, if so, (ii) whether culture helps to explain these differences in parental burnout. Based on the literature, we expected that the prevalence of parental burnout would vary across countries and that culture would help to explain this variation.

To address these questions, we assessed parents from 42 countries using the same instrument. Countries were selected to be geographically distributed across the five continents and to differ on economic and cultural indicators (Forum., 2018; Hofstede, 2001; Programme, 2018; see Table 1). To answer the question (i), we examined the prevalence and the mean level of parental burnout in each country. To address the question (ii), we tested the association between parental burnout and Hofstede's six cultural values (Hofstede, 2001; i.e., Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence) as the most widely used indicators of cross-cultural differences (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Taras et al., 2010). Given that the parents came from culturally, economically, and geographically diverse settings, we controlled for a large set of sociodemographic characteristics (age, sex, educational level, number of biological children and children in the household, age of the youngest and the oldest child, hours spent with children per day, number of women and men living in the household and caring for the children on a daily basis, working status, years spent in the country, ethnicity, family types, and neighborhood profile).

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