

Brief communication

**Assessment of burnout levels in a sample of police officers**

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## INTRODUCTION

The term *burnout* is used to designate the breakdown of something due to energy exhaustion.<sup>1</sup>

In the psychology area, it was firstly publicly used by Maslach on the occasion of the Annual Congress of the American Society of Psychology, in 1997. Burnout has been defined as a syndrome comprising factors related to exhaustion and strain resulting from a response to chronic work-related stressors. According to Maslach & Jackson,<sup>2</sup> it has specific symptoms and can be defined as comprising three factors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased sense of professional efficacy.<sup>3</sup> Pines & Aronson<sup>4</sup> define the syndrome as a state of mental, physical and emotional exhaustion caused by long-term exposure to emotionally demanding situations. Jackson et al.<sup>5</sup> consider these exhaustive emotional state as a result of an excessive psychological and emotional demand.

We highlight, however, that burnout is different from the classic reactions of stress because it is more associate with psychological fatigue, as pointed out by Ezmann et al.<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, Lunardi<sup>7</sup> believes the burnout syndrome is different from stress because whilst burnout comprises negative attitudes and actions towards users, clients, organization and work, stress has more to do with a particular relationship between the individual and his/her surrounding environment.

Kohan & Mazmanian<sup>8</sup> consider that burnout is an extreme state of resources draining, resulting from a chronic exposure to work-related stress. It is associated to decreased capacity of performing individual functions, physical indisposition, depression, anxiety, difficulties in developing interpersonal relations, increases in drug-usage, absenteeism, and higher number of workers replacement; deficit in work performance, intention of giving up and decrease in organizational commitment.

Rosse et al.<sup>9</sup> suggest that the level of self-esteem should be considered in the assessment of burnout. This is because the individual with low self-esteem tend to be less successful in interpersonal relations.

Ballone<sup>10</sup> reported that the early career years are the most vulnerable to the development of burnout, which prevails in women. According to Kohan & Mazmanian,<sup>8</sup> studies have already demonstrated that global perceptions of the workplace are important predictors of burnout. Golembiewski<sup>11</sup> stresses that burnout is most significantly found in individuals working in human service professions, although the concept of burnout has been extended to other diseases as well. Cherniss<sup>12</sup> points out that some professions involving a high degree of interpersonal contact may even affect the employees.

According to Gasparetto,<sup>13</sup> policing today requires police officers to constantly refine their public and interpersonal relationships, which allow them to interact with the community without losing the energy and authority that must be a natural trait of their personality. Burke<sup>14-16</sup> points out that police officers are as vulnerable to burnout as other professionals are, and that this association has not been adequately studied yet. Chamberlain & Zika<sup>17</sup> also consider that studies concerning this relation would be very important.

For all these reasons, it seems that changing the studies focus from the police to the police officer would be a very profitable action, once the meanings of the police actions rely on the professional, who many times does not depend on the organizational structures.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, this type of symptomatology may not be strongly bounded to the types of activities carried out.

We agree on the idea and by taking into consideration the indicators concerning the activities performed by police professionals, we have carried out a comparative study between two groups of police workers: from the administrative and operational areas working in the city of Porto Alegre. Our goal was to compare the burnout levels in both groups

## METHOD

A cross-sectional study was carried out with 60 police officers working in Porto Alegre. A Brazilian-Portuguese version of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI), translated and adapted by

Roazzi et al.<sup>19</sup> was used to measure burnout in the sample. The MBI is composed of 24 items where respondents indicate their answers in a 5-point Likert scale. The three factors that compose the inventory (emotional exhaustion, professional efficacy and depersonalization) are assessed through eight items each.

The sample was composed of employees from the administrative and operational sectors of two police departments of Porto Alegre, selected before taking part of group therapy activities. Once this is an exploratory study that will serve as basis for a further and wider analysis of burnout in police officers, we relied on a convenience sample. This is also the reason why other variables, such as sex and age, were not investigated. Inclusion criteria were: non-retired police officers from one of the two departments selected. Thirty-five subjects exclusively involved in internal activities and 25 in external policing were included. Free and informed consent was obtained from all respondents and none of them was lost during the study.

Statistical analysis was performed comparing the two groups using the Student's *t*-test for the total scores obtained with MBI. The Student's *t*-test was also used for comparison among the three factors that compose the inventory. The internal consistency of the scale was also assessed, based on Cronbach's alpha, once it has been recently validated in Brazil and its usage is still incipient.

## RESULTS

According to the outcomes of the Student's *t*-test (significance level of 5%), there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of the scale's total score, as well as in terms of each of the three factors that compose it, when considered separately (Table 1). As to the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

**Table 1** - Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) scores

	<b>External activities</b>	<b>Internal activities</b>
Total scores		
Mean	41.34	35.88
Standard deviation	22.56	25.24
t=0.88, GL=58, p<0.383		
Emotional exhaustion scores		
Mean	17.31	16.32
Standard deviation	12.64	11.03
t=0.317, GL=58, p<0.76		
Professional efficacy		
Mean	10.46	6.64
Standard deviation	7.32	8.77
t=1.641, GL=58, p<0.11		
Depersonalization scores		
Mean	13.26	12.20
Standard deviation	8.29	9.12
t=0.467, GL=58, p<0.65		

## DISCUSSION

No statistically significant differences were found between both groups, either when considering the total score of the three factors or each in isolation. Such a result suggests that burnout can be more related to organizational factors than to the type of activity performed. The present study meets the results of other investigations, which suggest that the syndrome onset is more associated to a sum of factors than due to the type of activity performed at work.<sup>20,21</sup> Storm &

Rothman<sup>22</sup> evidenced that the strategies used by police officers to cope with stressful situations may have a more significant role than the situation itself. The outcomes of the present study suggest that the situations experienced may not be a determinant factor in the syndrome development.

The prevalence of burnout in police officers was not assessed, as this was not an objective of the present study and the sample size was not suitable for such an evaluation. Moreover, although the scale used has already been validated in Brazil, there are no standardizations that enable the comparison between the police officers sample scores and the percentiles of the general population. This study was also important to highlight the internal consistence of the instrument adapted and validated by Roazzi et al.<sup>19</sup>

In general terms, this work has shown the importance of burnout measurement in police officers and it will be used as a basis for further investigation we intend to develop. Factors that contribute to emotional exhaustion, lack of professional efficacy and excessive depersonalization of police officers shall be better understood.

Investigating to what extent some singularities of policing can contribute to different labor-related activities may foster an advance in the implementation of more effective treatment and preventive measures.

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Objective: *To compare burnout levels in two groups of police officers, considering their working activities (administrative vs. operational).*



Methods: *Using a Brazilian Portuguese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a group of 35 police officers involved in operational activities was compared to a group of 25 officers involved in administrative activities. The Student t test was used to compare the total scores obtained in the scale, as well as the scores obtained individually in each of the factors that constitute it.*

Results: *Considering a level of significance of 95%, no difference was observed between the two groups in the total scores obtained in the scale ( $p < 0.383$ ) and neither in the three factors that constitute it, namely, emotional exhaustion ( $p < 0.76$ ), personal accomplishment ( $p < 0.11$ ) and depersonalization ( $p < 0.65$ ).*

Conclusion: *The results obtained in this study suggest that the symptoms associated with the burnout syndrome are not determined by the type of activity performed. However, further studies are necessary for a better investigation of this syndrome and of its relation with the police officer job.*

Keywords: *Burnout syndrome, police officers, occupational stress.*

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