Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

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A phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of burnout and what might help reduce its prevalence.

Master's thesis in Master of science in counselling
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Abstract

The scientific interest in burnout began in the 1970’s and has since grown steadily into a rich field of research. In its infancy, the research was mostly exploratory and qualitative, but with the emergence of several measuring tools the field now has an overwhelming amount of quantitative research. A lot of people experience burnout, and their experiences may provide valuable information to better understand its prevalence, information that might get lost in quantitative research.

This paper therefore explores the subjective experience of burnout among five working individuals. Their narratives provide a voice to the phenomenon shedding light on the lived experience. With a phenomenological approach and employing a thematic analysis, the experiences of the participants were examined to answer the research question: *What is the subjective experience of burnout among working individuals, and what might help reduce its prevalence?* The analysis revealed several key themes, including the lack of clarity surrounding the concept of burnout, resistance, and stigma in seeking help, and individual and organizational factors contributing to burnout. The participants expressed a lack of clarity about what burnout refers to and spoke about its negative connotations which left some hesitating to identify with it, seek support, or acknowledge their symptoms until after they became quite severe. Role ambiguity, the balance between work and private life, and the work culture emerged as three important factors contributing to burnout among the participants of this study.

The findings also indicate that burnout might be a marginalized issue. Resulting in that the participants did not receive the necessary attention, resources, and support for early prevention. This marginalization led participants to seek alternative explanations for their symptoms and to experience being undervalued and underappreciated. This paper argues that recognizing burnout as an occupational phenomenon and emphasizing prevention instead of focusing solely on its treatment might reduce some of its prevalence.

This paper contributes insights into the subjective experiences of burnout and their implications. It indicates that a clearer understanding, and a greater recognition of burnout is needed, addresses conceptual issues, highlights the consequences of its marginalization, and identifies factors contributing to burnout. It aims to increase the awareness and understanding of the phenomenon so that counselors, employers, and policy makers can become more effective in managing burnout and create healthier work environments.

Abstract in Norwegian

Den vitenskapelige interessen for utbrenthet begynte på 1970-tallet og har siden vokst jevnt til å bli et rikt forskningsfelt. I begynnelsen var forskningen hovedsakelig utforskende og kvalitativ, men med fremveksten av en rekke måleverktøy inneholder feltet nå en overveldende mengde kvantitativ forskning. Mange opplever utbrenthet, og deres erfaringer kan gi verdifull informasjon og en bedre forståelse for hvorfor det er så utbredt, informasjon som kan gå tapt i kvantitativ forskning.

Denne artikkelen utforsker derfor den subjektive opplevelsen av utbrenthet blant fem arbeidende individer. Deres fortellinger gir en stemme til fenomenet og kaster lys over den levde erfaringen. Ved å bruke en fenomenologisk tilnærming og tematisk analyse undersøker jeg deltakernes erfaringer for å svare på forskningsspørsmålet: *Hva er den subjektive opplevelsen av utbrenthet blant arbeidende individer, og hva er det mulig å gjøre for å redusere at det blir mer utbredt?*

Analysen avdekket flere sentrale temaer, inkludert mangelen på klarhet rundt begrepet utbrenthet, motstand og stigma knyttet til å søke hjelp, og individuelle og organisatoriske faktorer som bidrar til utbrenthet. Deltakerne ga uttrykk for manglende klarhet rundt begrepet utbrenthet, og at det har en del negative konnotasjoner som førte til at mange nølte med å identifisere seg med det, søke støtte eller erkjenne symptomer før de ble mer alvorlige. Uklare roller, balansen mellom arbeid og privatliv, og arbeidskultur fremstod som tre viktige faktorer som bidro til utbrenthet.

Resultatene indikerer også at utbrenthet kan være et marginalisert problem. Dette førte til at deltakerne ikke fikk den nødvendige oppmerksomheten, ressursene og støtten som trengs for å forebygge utviklingen av utbrenthet. Denne marginaliseringen førte til at deltakerne ga alternative forklaringer på symptomene sine og opplevde følelser av å være undervurdert og ikke bli satt pris på. Ved å anerkjenne utbrenthet som et yrkesfenomen og legge vekt på forebygging i stedet for bare behandling, argumenterer jeg for at man kan bidra til å redusere utbredelsen av utbrenthet.

Denne artikkelen gir innsikt i subjektive opplevelser av utbrenthet og deres implikasjoner. Den indikerer at det er behov for en klarere forståelse og større anerkjennelse av utbrenthet, den tar opp konseptuelle problemer, belyser konsekvensene av marginaliseringen, og identifiserer faktorer som bidrar til utbrenthet. Målet er å øke bevisstheten og forståelsen av fenomenet slik at rådgivere, arbeidsgivere og beslutningstakere er bedre rustet i håndteringen av utbrenthet og til å skape sunnere arbeidsmiljøer.

Acknowledgements

I have always liked the idea of writing. The thought of being able to bring my ideas to life by writing them down for others to read and make sense of amazes me. But it can be hard work. Countless hours of research may leave you with information that is irrelevant to what you're writing about, the text you're writing may end up sounding too complex, too simple, or simply be badly written. There have been times when I have despised writing this paper, but I have always reminded myself that the topic I am writing about is interesting and worthwhile to pursue. But, when even that thought did not prevail, I had excellent support from the people around me. I would like to thank Tord, Amalie and Anniken for always sharing, hearing and caring. Being reminded to enjoy the ride while I'm still a student, take care of myself, and do my best has made this process a lot more enjoyable. I would like to give a huge thanks to my supervisor, Jonathan Reams, I am extremely thankful for his ability to respond in a calm, collected and agile way when I have shared my incomplete ideas, ramblings, and concerns. With his guidance I have been able to trust the process and focus on writing and researching knowing I will always get invaluable feedback to improve my work. I am also very grateful to all the participants of this study who have shared their experiences, I've learned so much, thank you!

Knowing this is the last paper I will write in a while, maybe ever, I would like to end this section with a quote by Kahneman. *Nothing in life is as important as you think it is, while you are thinking about it.* When we're completely consumed by our thoughts, we may end up exaggerating the importance of what we're thinking about. In the grand scheme of things, if you're doing something to the best of your abilities, you're doing as well as you can.

Contents

1.Introduction

There are currently 25000 articles about burnout on Pubmed, with a huge increase in publications over the last couple of years. There is undoubtedly a vast interest in understanding more about burnout, but it currently lacks a unified international definition (Korczak et al., 2010). However, the most widely accepted definition of burnout is found in the international classification of disease, where it is defined as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (11th ed, ICD-11, as cited in, WHO, 2019). The world health organization add that burnout is an occupational phenomenon rather than a medical condition (WHO, 2019). This definition focuses on the cause of burnout and lack other relevant information, such as how it affects individuals, which is one of the biggest motivations behind writing this thesis. In the literature on burnout some aspects remain unclear, but what is clear is that burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion resulting from being exposed to prolonged and excessive stress over time (Freudenberg, 1974; Maslach, 1976; Bakker et al, 2014).

Burnout is recognized as a significant occupational health problem that affects the lives of countless working individuals. According to researchers, work-stress is one of the greatest health, mental health, and safety challenge we face today (Bährer, 2013). It is actually so prevalent that it is ranked as one of the most frequent illnesses among Europeans and Americans next to diabetes and cardiovascular illnesses (Akerstedt, 2004; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). The European agency for safety and health work report that almost one in four workers in Europe are affected by work-stress (European agency for safety and health, 2009). Epidemiological studies of general working populations have assessed the prevalence of burnout to be between 4% and 7% (Schaufeli, 2003).

It is perhaps not a complete mystery why so many people are experiencing an increase in stress. In the last few decades, there have been significant transformations in working environments worldwide which may be one reason for the prevalence of burnout that we see today. There has been a steady increase in the use of technology, and organization restructuring has become almost standard practice (Sparks et al., 2001). Moreover, changes in labor contracts and work-time scheduling have caused a radical shift in the work environment which put more stress on employees (Sparks et al., 2001). Work overload is a key risk factor for experiencing burnout, and in 2019, 47 percent of workers in Norway reported that they often or always had too much to do at work (SSB, 2020). I believe that it would be highly beneficial to diminish this trend because it has a negative impact on individuals health and organizations productivity. I want to contribute to change this trend by bringing awareness to what it is like to experience burnout and explore if and consequentially how it can be prevented.

Because there is a lack of consensus around how to define burnout, I set out to explore how those who identify as having been affected by burnout experienced it. This exploration will be informed by the theoretical background which will be presented in chapter two. The aim is to gain insight into what the participants remember from their past about what it was like, what they perceived as contributing to their burnout, how they coped with the experience and how it has been to recover from it. By analyzing interviews that explore these questions it may become clearer what the individuals would have needed to avoid burning out. The intention is that this knowledge can help inform interventions to prevent burnout and bring awareness to the phenomenon on a whole.

In 'Into the black', Neil Young sings that it is better to burn out than to fade away, but it is perhaps worse yet to burn out *and* fade away. In this paper I explore five participants experience with burnout, the challenges they faced and what they have learned through their lived experience of the phenomenon.

1.2 Why burnout?

As a student of counselling, it is relevant to know about what kind of challenges potential clients could face and seek help to resolve. By researching burnout, I present counsellors and others interested in this topic with insight into how the participants in this study experienced burnout with an aspiration that it can be applicable in other situations where burnout is concerned.

I am personally interested in this topic because as adults we spend so much of our time at work that I believe it should be a place where individuals can thrive and flourish. Instead, an increasing amount of people experience a lot of work-related stress that have unfortunate consequences for their health, both physically and mentally. When I hear *burnout*, I think of a cold fireplace where only blackened firewood and ash remain, a mere shadow of its earlier splendor as a roaring and dazzling fire. I wish to contribute to knowledge that may help individuals cope better in situations that are stressful in order to avoid this.

Lastly, it is my hope that by investigating the subjective experience of burnout and comparing it to see whether it reflects the literature could help shed some light on what is necessary to eventually have a unified definition of burnout. To enable this investigation, I will now present the process of narrowing the scope of this paper down to a single research question.

1.3 Research question

The formulation of the problem statement of this paper has been challenging because there are a lot of questions regarding burnout I would like to investigate. However, to condense the research topic down to one question while simultaneously trying to maintain the breadth and curiosity in the desire to learn more about the burnout experience, I set out to explore the following question: *What is the subjective experience of burnout among working individuals, and what might help reduce its prevalence?*

The main concern of this question revolves around making sense of the experience of the individuals I have interviewed. By setting out to explore the subjective experience of burnout, I encompass the whole process from the early sensation of symptoms to complete burnout. The goal is to explore the participants experience and try to understand more about the effect burnout has had on their lives. I am setting out to make sense of the prevalence of burnout, what it is like to seek help, and how burnout affects thinking, behavior, and health. The overarching goal of this paper is to give burnout a voice and generate knowledge that can be helpful in reducing its prevalence.

In the next chapter I will build the theoretical framework on burnout that is relevant to answer the research question presented here.

2. Theory and literature review

Burnout is considered a huge problem in the professional world (World Health Organization, 2008, as cited in Constantino et al., 2013). The amount of research on burnout has increased immensely since the 70's when the pioneers Freudenberg (1974), Maslach (1976) as well as other researchers began investigating the phenomenon. However, the phenomenon did not emerge out of thin air in the 70's. Phenomena with similar characteristics have been described in various mediums, reaching back as far as to the Old Testament (Muheim, 2013). In this chapter I will present a theoretical framework on burnout where I elaborate the term by introducing symptoms, models, measuring tools, risks, as well as presenting earlier research that are relevant to this project.

2.1 Burnout, old wine in a new bottle?

There are several examples of descriptions of conditions that are very similar to burnout throughout history. Already in the 1800s there was an academic interest to understand exhaustion from work. In the 19th century, Beard (1869) wrote about a condition he coined *neurasthenia*, referring to an exhaustion of the nervous system. Beard describes symptoms of neurasthenia that are similar those of burnout such as headaches, insomnia, and explicitly mentions the exhaustion dimension used in modern burnout theory (Beard, 1869).

Another example from the literature comes from Graham Greene's novel *A burnt-out case* (1960), where he writes about a famous architect's struggle of finding pleasure in his work and life in general. A burnt-out case is an exploration of burnout and the effects it can have on individuals, it raises questions about the role of work and how it is important in shaping our sense of purpose and identity.

In the Old Testament of the bible, there is a story about a man named Elijah. Elijah was a man who worked tirelessly in the name of God, accomplishing various miracles and victories (Muheim, 2013, p.39). However, all the hard work made Elijah terribly exhausted, so much that he eventually plunged into deep despair, wanting to die or fall into a deep sleep. Clerics from previous generations named this exhaustion *the Elijah fatigue* (Muheim, 2013, p. 39). Elijah fatigue bears a striking resemblance to burnout where Elijah's work eventually takes such a toll on his physical and psychological well-being that it becomes unbearable. This raises the question of whether burnout could be considered old wine in a new bottle (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, the systematic research on burnout is new, which will be shown in the next section where I present the background of modern burnout research.

2.2 Theoretical background

The theoretical work of establishing burnout which started in the mid 1970's was primarily exploratory at first (Maslach et al., 2001). In the early stage of researching, it was important to describe the phenomenon and document that it was not an uncommon response to job stress, and that it had certain characteristics that differentiated it from other conditions. To clarify how the term has evolved into what it means today, I will start this chapter by providing a brief overview of the development of burnout research.

Burnout was first described by Freudenberg in 1974 to explain the "[…] gradual emotional depletion and loss of motivation he observed among people who had volunteered to work for aid organizations in New York" (Bakker et al., 2014, p. 390). He defined it as "[…] a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life" (Bakker et al., 2014, p. 390). Around the same period, Maslach (1976) started interviewing human service workers about the emotional stress they experienced in their work and discovered that they employed various strategies to cope with it. These strategies had implications for their professional identity and their job behavior (Maslach et al., 2001). The almost simultaneous discovery of burnout respectively by Maslach (1976) and Freudenberg (1974) mark two different paths for research on burnout. Freudenberg's approach being more practical, while Maslach's approach being more scientific (Muheim, 2013).

In the beginning, burnout research was primarily qualitative, focusing on observations, interviews, and case-studies; a pioneering phase to establish burnout as a real and worthwhile phenomenon to study (Maslach et al., 2001). Through this early exploratory research, several themes emerged regularly: *Emotional exhaustion* induced by a considerable amount of interaction with people, *depersonalization* usually in the form of cynicism, and *reduced personal accomplishment* (Maslach et al., 2001). Maslach claimed that these dimensions were a result of that:

1. The provision of service or care can be very demanding and involving.
2. Emotional exhaustion is not an uncommon response to such an overload.
3. Depersonalization (meaning cynicism) is related to emotional stress at work.
4. Personal accomplishment (meaning performance level) declines, a first indicator of a striking behavioral change. (Muheim, 2013, p. 42).

From the very beginning, these three dimensions of burnout dominated the literature. They have later been refined and operationalized, but this classical understanding of burnout has been very influential and followed the transition to the more empirical phase of research.

2.2.1 Empirical phase

After having discovered the responses to chronic work stress mentioned above, the research shifted to be more quantitative and empirical in nature. Researchers in the empirical phase of burnout research started to make more use of questionnaires and surveys which enabled them to study larger groups of workers (Muheim, 2013). This resulted in more robust findings, and the emergence of several measuring tools which will be discussed in a different section.

In the 90's the study of burnout began to spread to various other professions, such as computer science, the military, and managers in organizations, researchers also began studying more complex relationships between the dimensions (Muheim, 2013). In the 2000s, researchers started to look at comorbidity and try to explain the difference between burnout and other related diagnosis, such as depression and anxiety (Muheim, 2013).

2.2.2 Burnout today

Today, burnout is recognized as a serious occupational health problem that have consequences for both individuals and organizations. Burnout is being investigated in several countries as it is linked to "[…] high organizational costs, personnel turnover, absenteeism, productivity and quality problems, the occurrence of serious psychological and physical problems […]" (Constantino et al., 2013, p. 90). In Sweden, burnout has been a medical diagnosis since 1997 (Friberg, 2009). Psychiatric disorders were in 2006 the predominant reason for long-term sick leave among women in Sweden (33.8%) and it was the second most common reason (25.5%) among Swedish men (Lubbadeh, 2020).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic showed that frontline healthcare workers were prone to burnout due to working long hours under very stressful and challenging conditions over a long period of time (Galanis et al., 2021). This highlighted the need to have preventative measures in place to avoid that a huge portion of frontline workers ended up burned out in critical but stressful situations.

Burnout is still a subject that is under development. Especially the question of whether it should be included as a diagnosis in diagnosis manuals as ICD-11, DSM-IV etc., is an important question to answer.

In summary burnout has been on the tongues of people long before the work of scientifically investigating it began. It has been established as a common response of individuals who are exposed to stress which result in mental and physical exhaustion, cynicism and reduced personal accomplishments. It has been studied in a variety of professions, and an appropriate response to deal with it is called for as it has negative consequences for individuals and organizations. In the next section I will describe various ways to measure burnout to show some of the theoretical disagreements about how to define it, before I present the working definition in this paper.

2.3 Measuring burnout

To date, more than 90% of studies on burnout topics have been performed with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach et al. 1996; Kaschka et al. 2011) MBI measures burnout using 22 items to address emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1996).

The MBI does have some limitations especially when used outside of an American and Anglo-Saxon context and is why different tools have emerged (Milićević-Kalašić, 2013). Additionally, the first MBI tool was created for use on people in the human services (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach and Jackson (1996) later developed a more general version of MBI that could be applied to a variety of professions, however, the items in the MBI general survey (MBI-GS) are framed in one direction. This means that the items measuring exhaustion and depersonalization are all framed negatively, whereas the items measuring professional efficacy are phrased positively (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). Demerouti and Bakker (2008) argue that this is inferior to a more balanced measuring tool where the scales include both positively and negatively worded items.

The shortcomings of the MBI led Demerouti and Bakker (2008) to develop a new measuring tool, namely *The Oldenburg burnout inventory* (OLBI). The OLBI measure the two core dimensions of burnout: exhaustion and disengagement from work (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). OLBI cover the affective *and* the physical and cognitive aspects of exhaustion which means the instrument is also applicable to workers who do physical and information-processing work (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008) while the professional efficacy dimension is left out completely because they do not consider it as one of the core dimensions of burnout.

When researchers in Denmark were to conduct a large study, they found that they could not use the MBI and instead created the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) (Kristensen et al., 2005). CBI scales do not measure stable traits of the individuals but degrees of burnout that may change over time. This measuring tool does not include the depersonalization dimension, but rather focus on two core dimensions, *fatigue,* and *exhaustion,* and consists of 19 items (Kristensen et al. 2005). The CBI measure personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client related burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005).

While the OLBI and the CBI distance themselves from the MBI in that they do not implement the reduced efficacy dimension in their measuring tool, other researchers have found that the three-factor solution had the best fit with their data (Salmela-Aro et al., 2010). The Bergen Burnout Inventory (BBI) was tested on 742 young Finnish managers and 414 Estonian managers and showed a satisfactory reliability and validity across participants (Salmela-Aro et al., 2010). This show that even newer emerging tools still find support for the MBI.

The lack of consensus when it comes to measuring burnout has led to that some researchers conclude that burnout cannot be used as a medical diagnosis because the findings are based on different measures making it inconsistent (Kaschka et al., 2011). However, others argue that the burnout phenomenon deserves more attention, and that it is in fact possible to measure burnout reliably and validly, but that researchers need to settle their disagreements first (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

In summary, there are various ways of operationalizing burnout and there exist no real consensus about which one is the *optimal* measure. However, most of the studies on burnout has applied the MBI. In the next section I will be presenting the definition of burnout that will be applied in this study.

2.4 Defining burnout

When researchers first started to show interest in the phenomenon it was viewed as a controversial term (Maslach et al., 2001). On the one hand it was a useful phenomenon because it described the complex relation between *work* and *worker,* but it was at the same time ridiculed because it appeared to be another nonscholarly pop psychological fad that would surely pass (Maslach et al., 2001). Despite initial debates and due to the development of theoretical models to explain it, burnout is now recognized as a serious scientific topic to study (Maslach et al., 2001).

Even though most of the literature on burnout identify three dimensions of burnout there is no generally accepted definition yet (Nil et al., 2010; Kaschka et al., 2011). The most widely acknowledged theoretical definition describe it as a three-dimensional construct (Maslach & Jackson 1996) containing; exhaustion, professional efficacy, and cynicism (Maslach et al., 2001; Lubbadeh, 2020). Exhaustion refers to intense physical and emotional exhaustion that impacts the functionality of performing work-tasks (Lubbadeh, 2020). Cynicism refers to an attitude that is cold and skeptical toward clients, customers, and colleagues, as well as a loss of personal involvement in relational matters (Lubbadeh, 2020). Professional efficacy, or what is often referred to as a reduction in professional accomplishment, occur when people evaluate themselves negatively, and when individuals have the profound sense that they are ineffective at work (Lubbadeh, 2020).

Due to the difficulties of explaining the complex relationship between these three dimensions there are alternative theories which instead propose that it is a unidimensional construct, with only the exhaustion dimension (Pines & Aronson 1988), while other scholars advocate for reducing the concept somewhat and keep two dimensions; exhaustion, and depersonalization (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). However, Maslach (2001) argue that exhaustion is not simply something that is experienced, but also something that prompts action to distance oneself from work. From this she argues that depersonalization is a crucial dimension because it explains the distancing behavior that many emotionally exhausted individuals show. The last dimension of reduced professional accomplishment is more complex but is thought to be induced by either exhaustion or cynicism or a combination of the two.

In this paper I will be using the classical definition of burnout as a three-dimensional construct and see whether it reflects the findings of my research. Additionally, most of the earlier research that I draw on in this paper use the classical definition of burnout making it a more practical and unifying choice.

2.5 Earlier research

In this section I will present phenomenological and quantitative research that are relevant to answer the research questions. By presenting this research I intend to establish the theoretical context and background that already exist and show how the research in this paper can advance this knowledge. As I made explicit in the formulation of the problem statement, I intend to make sense of the prevalence of burnout, what it is like to seek help, and how burnout affect thinking, behavior, and health. Earlier research has attempted to show how burnout has become as prevalent as it is.

2.5.1 Burnout, a consequence of unreasonable demands*?*

A central question to ask, is why burnout is so prevalent in the working population. Gustafsson, Norberg and Strandberg (2008) wanted to study female healthcare workers narrative of burnout because they believed that the narrative of these healthcare workers could provide information which most quantitative burnout studies cannot. They investigated the difference between being and becoming burned out. In their study they found that the healthcare workers were "[…] torn between what one wants to be and what one manages" (Gustafsson et al., 2008). The participants in their study struggled to live up to their own ideals and were dissatisfied with themselves for not managing to live to do so, they were also dissatisfied with others for not giving them the confirmation they sought. In their article, Gustafsson and colleagues (2008) call for a reflection about reasonable versus unreasonable demands to increase tolerance.

This study shows that unreasonable demands from others and themselves may cause stress and ultimately burnout. The next question I wish to explore is what research say about burned-out individuals and seeking help.

2.5.2 Seeking professional help

Once individuals develop burnout, the next sensible step would be to seek help. Various studies have investigated how and when people seek professional help to cope with burnout. One large study (N=873), of which 454 students had high scores of burnout found that only one third of the burned out students sought help (Dyrbye et al., 2015). They concluded that perceived stigma was one of the main explanations for why such a low number decided to seek professional help. Another study confirmed that help-seeking behavior is limited when individuals are affected by burnout (Putnik et al., 2010).

Earlier research shows that it can be difficult to seek help when affected by burnout. The next research I present shows that not recognizing oneself as ill, or not being acknowledged as ill influence the development and recovery of burnout.

2.5.3 Lack of recognition

I want to explore the subjective experience of burnout, and thus it is relevant to ask whether individuals who are affected by burnout identify themselves as burned out. Is the behavior of individuals affected by burnout different from those who are not?

Engebretsen and Bjorbækmo (2020) did a phenomenological study on burnout where they argue that even though burnout is often labeled as medically unexplained syndrome, it does not mean it should be dismissed or be misunderstood as other diagnosis such as depression or anxiety. In their study they conclude that "[t]he findings indicate a lack of concern for taking care of themselves, ignoring the sensations of illness" (Engebretsen & Bjorbækmo, 2020, p. 443). They argue that a lack of recognition of the illness (i.e., burnout) may have affected the participants recovery and that conversely early recognition of subjective health complaints might hinder the onset of early symptoms of burnout (Engebretsen & Bjorbækmo, 2020).

Earlier research show that burnout could be a consequence of unreasonable demands, and that help-seeking behavior is affected by burnout. It also suggests that ignoring the sensation of burnout because of a lack of recognition could worsen the situation. I will now present two models that describe the dimensions of burnout theoretically.

2.6 Burnout models

Burnout describe a psychological process characterized by certain symptoms that affect people who experience chronic stress at work (Nuallaong, 2013). In this section I will present two models that seek to explain this process.

2.6.1 Maslach & Leiter burnout model

Leiter and Maslach (1988) propose in their model that burnout progress sequentially:

> (1) Stressful interactions with supervisors increase the workers' feelings of emotional exhaustion;
>
> (2) high levels of exhaustion lead to depersonalization, unless the workers have frequent supportive contact with their coworkers;
>
> (3) as depersonalization persists, the workers' feelings of accomplishment in their work diminish, although supportive interpersonal contact with coworkers may help to decelerate this process.

This sequential development starts with the one dimension that there is virtually no disagreement about. Exhaustion in this case refers to feelings of being emotionally drained and overwhelmed caused by work-related stressors. In turn, this can lead to a sense of depersonalization (or cynicism), which is when an individual develops negative, cynical, and detached attitudes towards others. This may manifest as a lack of empathy towards colleagues, clients or patients, and these individuals may also have a reduced ability to connect to others. According to Maslach and Leiter, these thoughts and behaviors are often considered unprofessional, and they are therefore often not shared with others, meaning the cynicism dimension is often suffered in silence (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Exhaustion on the other hand can often be showcased as something to be proud of because it proves you are committed and hardworking. Maslach and Leiter (1988) have found that exhaustion tend to prompt depersonalizing actions, which is why they suggest there is a strong connection between the two.

The reduced personal accomplishment dimension refers to a sense of diminished competence, productivity, and achievement in one's work. This in turn, can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and a reduced sense of personal values (Maslach & Leiter, 1988). This can also be a contributor to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization because individuals may end up feeling overwhelmed and disconnected from their work and the people they work with (Maslach & Leiter, 1988). These three dimensions as interconnected, meaning change in one dimension can impact the other two.

Maslach and Leiter's (1988) model explain the sequential development of burnout and highlight that there are certain factors, such as interpersonal support, that may mediate the development of burnout. The next model accommodates other factors that may play a role in the lives of individuals who experience symptoms of burnout.

2.6.2 Conservation of resources model

The conservation of resource model (COR) is a psychological model that has been applied to a wide range of contexts, including the study of burnout (Prapanjaroensin et al., 2017). The model was first generated by Hobfoll (1989) to describe the stress process and bridge the gap between environmental and cognitive viewpoints (Hobbs, 1989). In psychology it has long been argued that people strive to create a life that will have success and pleasure, but Hobfoll argued that this had not yet been incorporated in the study of stress (Hobfoll, 1989). This is what led to the creation of COR, a model that describe how people strive and struggle to create and maintain a life filled with resources they value, and the protection of these resources.

In the conservation of resources model, stress is defined as a response to environmental threats: "(a) the threat of a net loss of resources, (b) the net loss of resources, or (c) a lack of resource gain following the investment of resources" (Hobfoll, 1989). This means that both the perceived loss of resources *and* the actual loss of resources can produce stress.

The COR model proposes that there are four resources that people seek to preserve; Objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energy (Hobfoll, 1989):

1. *Objects* are material resources such as money, a home, clothes etc., object resources are often linked to status, and are essential relative to achieve material goals.
2. *Conditions* are resources that support well-being, such as being healthy, social relationships, or status. Condition resources are essential because they represent basic needs such as feeling secure, having a purpose, and bringing a sense of belonging.

3. *Personal characteristics* are resources that help individuals cope with stress. These are internal resources such as self-esteem, positivism and self-efficacy and make individuals more robust to pursue goals and opportunities.
4. *Energy resources* are mental and physical resources that individuals need to achieve goals and handle demands. Examples of energy resources can be motivation and physical stamina. These resources can be depleted by chronic stress and lead to, for example, burnout.

The COR model proposes that a perceived threat to any of these four resources can trigger a stress response, the loss of resources, burnout, and various other negative outcomes. The conservation of these resources is therefore essential to individuals because people strive to maintain them as they represent what is important for people's well-being.

The reason I include COR in this paper instead of other influential models such as the job demands-resource model (J-DR) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), is that the COR is a framework that consider a non-sequential development of burnout through physical, social, psychological, and energy, and seek to explain how the importance of keeping these resources impact individuals. COR suggest that the loss of resources in one domain can spill over into another domain. An individual who experiences the loss of status at work may affect their personal domain and for example make them less likely to engage in non-work activities which further deteriorates their resources (Prapanjaroensin et al., 2017). This model enables a broader scope about what may contribute to burnout and is why I have included it.

The model aims to explain the process where stressors can lead to resource loss and depletion, which can ultimately manifest as burnout. Understanding this process could enable researchers and practitioners to develop interventions aimed at the underlying causes of burnout, the factors that contribute to burnout, and how to address them.

2.7 Contributing factors of burnout

Stress has been central in the theoretical work on burnout. People experience stress for various reasons and handle it very differently. Factors that contribute to burnout are typically categorized as *organizational* and *personal* factors. In the following section I will present what the literature says about these factors.

2.7.1 Organizational factors

External factors, such as workplace conditions, influence the risk of burnout and have been researched extensively. One way to think about the risk of experiencing burnout is that "[…] persons who suffer burnout from their work may also be seen as barometers sensitive to societal conditions: those who display 'healthy' reactions to 'sick' conditions" (Rösing, 2003, as cited in, Karl & Fischer, 2013). Thus, people who experience burnout may not simply be worse at dealing with stress but may exhibit a normal reaction to an unhealthy work environment. Literature on organizational risk factors of burnout identify six major domains: Workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Workload is a strong indicator for burnout. A lot of research shows that working hours have a negative effect on employee's health and indicate a tendency toward burnout. One study found that factors such as work overload led to more stress at work and that it is predicative of depression which is closely associated with burnout (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). In a study of cancer care workers, stress at work is predominantly associated with workload. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are strongly associated with having too much to do at work (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013).

Research has found a clear link between lack of control and high levels of stress. When individuals perceive that they have no say or influence over their own work or their own circumstances, they may feel hopeless, helpless, and frustrated (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). On the contrary, if individuals have the impression that they can influence their work, and exercise autonomy they are more likely to experience engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

People tend to hope that their work will give them certain rewards, such as "[…] money, prestige, and security […]" (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013, p. 122). When individuals perceive that they are being devalued at work it devalues both the work they are doing and themselves. This can lead to demotivation, disillusionment, and frustration, and be a source of stress and burnout. On the contrary, individuals who perceive that they are rightfully being rewarded for their work have a lower chance of experiencing burnout.

Community is a factor in developing burnout when individuals experience that they are disconnected or unsupported in their relationships at work. Conflict, lack of trust and unresolved conflict in individuals' community are factors that increase the risk of burnout. On the other hand, when the support in an individual's community is working well, they are more likely to experience engagement at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Being treated fairly at work is another factor that can increase or decrease the risk of developing burnout. When individuals experience a lack of fairness at work, there is more uncertainty regarding their place in the community, and individuals who experience decisions at work as unfair may resolve to cynicism, anger, and hostility (Maslach & leiter, 2016).

Values reflect the ideals and motivation that brought the individual to the job in the first place. It connects the worker and the workplace beyond paying for labor and doing labor. When there is a conflict between personal values and workplace values the "[…] employees will find themselves making a trade-off between work they want to do and work they have to do […]" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This can often lead to burnout because work becomes more of a chore than a calling.

It is demanding to work with people. "Human service professionals are generally at relatively high risk of burnout" (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013, p. 125-126). Individuals in helper roles are especially at a higher risk of experiencing burnout than other professions. For example, people working with chronically ill people or incurable patients where there is little hope may experience burnout. Studies also show that conflict with patients, and conflict in other relationships at work increase the risk of client-related burnout (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013).

Although organizational factors are a decisive factor for developing burnout, some individuals may still experience stress because of personal factors (Alarcon et al., 2009).

2.7.2 Personal factors

Research suggest that a stressful work environment is one of the most important predictors for burnout, but that does not mean that one should completely dismiss the influence of personal factors (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). How a person cope with stress appears to be a relatively strong predictor for evaluating a person's risk of developing burnout (Shimizutani et al., 2008). I will begin this section with personal factors that increase the risk of burnout, and then present personality factors that reduce the risk.

Neuroticism has been widely studied as a personal risk factor in burnout studies (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). People who score high on neuroticism use coping strategies that increase the likelihood of burnout, such as wishful thinking and self-criticism (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). One study showed that neuroticism was directly associated with burnout (Shimizutani et al., 2008). Shimizutani and colleagues (2008) found that subjective stressors, coping behavior, and burnout were related to personality characteristics in their study on nurses in Japan.

A term closely related to neuroticism is negative affect*.* Workers who score high on tests for negative affectivity may be predisposed to experience their workplace as unpleasant and stressful. This also negatively impacts their relations at work, because when they express negative attitudes, their colleagues, clients, or supervisors may respond negatively to their attitude and further deteriorate their perception of the workplace (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013).

Perfectionism is associated with a higher risk of burnout, as the behavior of a perfectionist can quickly drain the mental energy of a person and may also cause workaholism (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013)

Alarcon and colleagues (2009) identify several personality traits that make individuals less prone to burnout which I will now present. A lower risk of burnout is most often found in people who score high on extraversion. Extraverted people tend to be more positive and see problems in a more positive light. People who score high on agreeableness tend to evoke more positive responses from their social environment and they generally view people in a more favorable way making them less prone to experience negative response in a work environment. People who score high on openness tend to use humor to cope with stress, and there has been reported a modest positive relationship between openness and personal accomplishment as well as a negative relationship between openness and depersonalization. However, some research show that nurses with open personalities are more likely to be emotionally exhausted. People who score high on conscientiousness cope with stress by manipulating their work-environment in a way that removes or reduce stress. Research suggests that there is a positive correlation between conscientiousness and personal accomplishment, but also that it is correlated with depersonalization. Conscientious people also have a lower risk of experiencing emotional burnout.

In summary, those who have a less hardy personality type on the big five personality test such as neuroticism tend to score higher on burnout scales, while research suggest that the opposite is true of less hardier personality types.

2.7.3 Demographic risk factors

Burnout is a phenomenon linked to many areas of life, and there are some demographic risk factors linked to burnout that I will mention briefly as they are less relevant for this paper. There are for example unconclusive research on whether gender can be a predictor of higher levels of emotional exhaustion in women and higher levels of cynicism in men, but they appear nonsignificant when other factors are included (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013, p. 135). Younger people tend to be at a higher risk of developing burnout, perhaps because they do not have the same work experience as older individuals and have different expectations of their workplace (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). Marital status affect burnout in that married individuals appear to experience less burnout than those who are single (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013).

I will now present theory that enable the identification of symptoms that may indicate that an individual is affected by burnout.

2.8 Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of burnout are both physical and psychological (Melamed et al. 1999; World Health Organization 2008). Some of the most frequent symptoms are:

1. Muscular or musculoskeletal pain (neck and back).

2. Headaches, migraines.

3. Constant fatigue.

4. sleep disorders.

5. Gastrointestinal (gastritis to ulcers) and cardiovascular disorders (hypertension, heart attacks, among others)

6. Immunodeficiency with colds or constant gripes, disorders of the skin (rashes, allergies, hair loss, increased white hair)

7. Disorders of the respiratory system (deep breath, bronchitis, asthma)

8. Sexual dysfunctions (decreased sexual desire, dyspareunia/anorgasmia in women, impotence or premature ejaculation in men), menstrual changes in women

9. Substance use (Constantino et al., 2013, p. 90).

The physical symptoms of burnout have been investigated in relation to burnout, and a longitudinal study of Finnish industrial workers found burnout to be a predictor for being hospitalized for cardiovascular problems (Ahola et al., 2009).

When it comes to the relation between mental health issues and burnout it appears to be a bit more complex. It has been assumed for a while that burnout is a condition that subsequently led to mental health problems, but it can also be argued that burnout itself is a form of mental health issue. This discussion has mostly been about differentiating depression from burnout, and some scholars conclude that they are indeed different phenomena: "[…] burnout is job- related and situation-specific, as opposed to depression, which is general and context-free" (Leiter & Maslach, 2016, p. 353).

In Norway, the leading cause of long-term sick leave is muscular and skeletal pain (SSB, 2019). This is one of the symptoms of burnout, and a study by Grossi and colleagues (2009) on 2300 women in Sweden found that burnout predict pain in various bodily locations such as back and shoulder pain. This may indicate that a greater number of individuals are experiencing burnout, but that it is not identified as such. It then becomes increasingly important to understand what one can do to prevent it.

2.9 Preventative measures against burnout

By understanding burnout and its underlying causes, it becomes possible to implement preventative measures that are more successful. The prevention of burnout is in the best interest of society for reasons that have hopefully become clear throughout this text. It negatively impacts quality of life as it is the cause of both physical and psychological illnesses and symptoms. Secondly, it impacts productivity and quality of work, which in some cases can be expensive, and in other cases such as in health care it can have fatal consequences.

In a literature review of intervention programs for burnout, Awa and colleagues (2010) found that interventions aimed at preventing burnout had an eighty percent success rate in reducing burnout (Awa et al., 2010). The intervention programs were either person-directed, organization directed or a combination of the two. What was found in the literature was that a combination of person-directed and organization-directed interventions were the most effective at reducing burnout (Awa et al., 2010). With refresher courses, they found that a reduction in emotional exhaustion could last for up to two years. Another finding in this literature review was that even though intervention programs appear to be effective, very few prevention programs have been conducted (Awa et al., 2010). Well-designed intervention programs are effective in reducing burnout, but these programs could also be counterproductive if not sensitive to the participants context and needs (Awa et al., 2010). It appears that in order to prevent burnout there needs to be a balance between organizational and person-directed interventions that are contextually sensitive. This concludes the chapter on theory as I will now present the methodological design of my research.

3. Method

Research method and methodology is essential to the human endeavor of producing knowledge (Friesen et al, 2012, p.3). As per Kvale (2009, p. 121), the initial definition of the term *method* is the path that leads to the desired objective. In order to generate dependable knowledge through research, it is crucial to comprehend the selection and application of the method, and clearly and explicitly articulate the methodological process. This is a prerequisite to yield sound, reliable knowledge.

In the first section of this chapter I will outline my ontological and epistemological underpinnings, followed by a discussion of more detailed methodological and design decisions.

3.1 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology is the study of what exists, or what are (Langdridge, 2007, p.29). It is helpful that a researcher asks himself what his ontological position or perspective is before conducting the research. The ontological position of a researcher underlies the researcher's understanding of reality and the phenomena that is being studied. I argue that the question of *what are* is not just a superfluous theoretical question, but a relevant methodological question because then:

> […] a researcher can begin to see their own ontological view of the social world as a position that should be established and understood, rather than and obvious and universal truth which can be taken for granted. (Mason, 2017, p. 14)

My project is aimed at exploring burnout from a phenomenological position, which means I am interested in the subjective experience of my participants and their conscious reflections about these experiences. I am therefore committed to making sense of language in written or spoken form. One major ontological assumption in this research is that truth can be accessed through language (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). Truth in language is closely tied to the meaning of language, and so the study of experience is closely tied to the inquiry of its meaning (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 3).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is the theory of knowledge (Mason, 2017, p. 16). Epistemology pertains to the inquiry of how one can attain knowledge about a phenomenon, and how to exhibit that knowledge (Mason, 2017, p. 16). Epistemology is important when it comes to the context of my research and the evidence of knowledge that I will present to support the concept of burnout. (Mason, 2017, p. 16). I present an analysis of the interview data to support the claims I make in this paper.

The research in this paper is mostly inductive in nature, meaning the discoveries of themes, insights and so on derive from the data itself, this is often referred to as a bottom-up process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The contrasting epistemological way to do research is deductive, or a top-down approach. In deductive research, the researcher brings a range of ideas, concepts, and general understanding to grasp the meaning of a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2012). However, it is almost impossible to work purely inductive because a researcher almost always brings previous knowledge into the research. That is why I claim it is *mostly* inductive because this research draws on the theoretical framework of burnout presented in the previous chapter.

3.2 Qualitative method

I am looking to better understand how the phenomenon of burnout is experienced and have chosen to apply a qualitative method to conduct my research. Part of the reason for choosing a qualitative method in my project is because the measuring tools most often applied to research on burnout are reported to be somewhat unreliable outside of the US (Milićević-Kalašić, 2013). This would have implications if I were to have chosen a quantitative method, as the tools I would be working with potentially could be unfitted for a Norwegian work-environment.

What weighs the heaviest in favor of a qualitative method is that the research question of this project revolves around what it is like to experience the process of burnout. Given the nature of what I am researching combined with my ontological underpinnings, I am interested in the verbal description of the phenomenon, and not the relationships between variables, which would have made a quantitative method a better fit (Silverman, 2020, p.6).

The intention is to get a deeper understanding of burnout. Some scholars claim in a generalized way, that qualitative studies emphasize getting insight, while quantitative studies emphasize getting an overview which speaks in favor of doing a qualitative study (Tjora, 2012, p.22). Although this may not encompass all contrasts between quantitative and qualitative studies, given the research goal of acquiring in-depth insight, I argue that a qualitative method was the best fit for this project. The question of how to acquire this insight will be presented next.

3.3 Phenomenology

To get insight into burnout and what it is like to experience it, I have chosen a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is the study of lived experience, and how it is structured through consciousness (Friesen et al, 2012 p. 1). For phenomenology to be employed as a method it should be used to analyze the language people use, spoken or written, about the phenomenon in question and the researcher's task is to give this language meaning (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Phenomenology explores the ways in which people describe and make sense of their lived experiences, which is what I have done in this research. The phenomenological researcher is "[…] engaging in a series of processes designed to generate rich descriptions of people's lived experiences of the world" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 21). These rich descriptions give the researcher a peek into the phenomena from a unique perspective.

Van Manen (2016, p.26) writes that "phenomenology is more a method of questioning than answering […]". Thus, for a paper that sets out to answer a research question, it may sound senseless to pick a phenomenological method. However, in questioning people who have experienced burnout there lies a potential of discovering understandings and insights about the phenomenon that would not have become available otherwise (Van Manen, 2016). Through Acquiring insight into the distinctive experiences of the participants, I intend to develop a deeper understanding of how they perceive the issue of burnout and then take a closer look at the implications of these experiences.

As almost every case of burnout is unique, I wanted to explore the phenomenon through interviews without too many preconceptions about it. To avoid jumping to conclusions about the phenomena too quickly I have worked with bracketing my knowledge about the phenomena, which is a technique originated by Husserl called épоche (Lindseth & Norberg, 2021). In practical terms, bracketing my opinions meant that when I examined the phenomenon, I strived to put all that I thought I knew about the phenomenon in brackets to prevent previous knowledge from interfering with what emerged in the interviews.

The reason for putting aside all my theoretical knowledge before delving into the research was to make the phenomenon itself appear more clearly. I believe that bracketing my preconceived knowledge about the phenomena during the process of creating the interview guide and conducting interviews has made the phenomenon clearer.

I do not, however, believe it is possible to *completely* bracket previous knowledge. A phenomenon cannot be completely isolated outside of the researchers sphere of knowledge, culture, and history (Friesen et al., 2012, p. 1). But in the attempt to bracket my ideas, I believe the participants of the research got to share their experiences more freely and provide an invaluable first-hand perspective. I have strived to receive these perspectives as unobstructed as possible. By unobstructed I refer to the act of refraining from the natural urge of making judgements about the factual, that is, to bracket these judgements and instead be open to the meanings in the narratives themselves (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Sloan and Bowe (2014) describe the process of phenomenology methodology in qualitative research, as aimed at giving voice to subjective experiences:

> Phenomenology reduces a human subject's experiences with a phenomenon to a description of its 'essence', written down, usually, and so a qualitative researcher will identify a phenomenon as an 'object' of human experience (Cresswell, 2007) and give voice to it. (Sloan & Bowe, 2014)

To get to the essence of the phenomenon and give this object a voice is the intention of phenomenology in this research. It is often difficult to admit to being burned out, thus giving this phenomenon a voice is a meaningful endeavor because it can often be suffered in silence. I will now turn to how the data material were interpreted.

3.4 Hermeneutics

I place my research in a phenomenological hermeneutic methodology. Historically there are two approaches that are dominant in phenomenology. The first is the descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology represented by Husserl (Van Manen, 2016). The second approach is the interpretative (hermeneutic or existential), who is mainly influenced by Heidegger (Van Manen, 2016). Heidegger writes that "the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation," (Heidegger, 1962, p.37). He thus implies that phenomenology without interpretation is meaningless. Other scholars write that hermeneutics "[…]is the art and science of interpretation and thus also of meaning" (Friesen, 2012, p.1). Combined, this represents a phenomenological hermeneutical method.

The phenomenological approach in this paper is influenced by Lindseth and Norberg's (2004) methodological paper who affirm that through the interpretation of text it is possible to get at a phenomenon's essential meaning. Their understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology has been helpful in guiding the interpretative work:

> We do not believe in 'pure' phenomenology in which essences are seen intuitively, 'uncontaminated' by interpretation. Nor are we interested in 'pure' hermeneutics, i.e. in text interpretation that does not transcend the text meaning to reveal essential traits of our life world. (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p.147)

I have applied hermeneutic phenomenology to this project with this in mind. I have tried to find the balance between pure phenomenology and interpretation, to keep the interpretative part in mind without losing what makes phenomenology so interesting, namely its ability to reveal what Lindseth and Norberg refer to as essential traits of our life world. In the next sections I will describe more concrete methodological choices.

3.5 Planning the practical research

Kvale (2009) presents three fundamental questions one should ask oneself when planning to do research: *what, why,* and *how* (p.121).

The first question I asked myself was *what* the purpose of the research was supposed to be. Following the COVID-19 epidemic it became clearer to me that work-life varies a lot in terms of workload, workhours, fairness etc., and it appears to me that the work environment are changing and becoming more difficult. The purpose was then to contribute to a broader understanding of burnout and provide insight into the social, work-cultural, and psychological factors that contribute to its prevalence.

Why I am researching burnout is because a significant amount of people experiences it, and it would be beneficial for organizations to know how it is experienced by their employees and why they experience it. It may also contribute to informing more successful preventative measures and recovering strategies. Coming up with solutions to solve or reduce burnout is of value to society as a whole because of its negative consequences.

Then the more methodological question of *how* presents itself. This question is aimed at the planning the research procedures and techniques. I will begin by describing my use of the qualitative interview in my research, which is how I collected data in this project.

3.6 Data collection

I chose to do interviews to gather data for this project as it would be difficult to, for example, do observations as most of the participants had been burned out, but were not at present. An interview is an active process to generating knowledge, where the interviewer and the interviewed together produce knowledge (Kvale, 2009, p.37). The purpose of the qualitative interview is to get a better understanding of some aspects of the interviewee's life, from his or her own perspective (Kvale, 2009, p. 43). This very much aligns with the phenomenological approach that I have chosen for this paper.

The interview is much like a normal conversation, although there are certain techniques that differentiates it from a normal conversation. I was interested in a specific topic and encouraged my participants to talk about their experiences related to burnout. I steered the conversation in a certain direction, without being overly directional. I have attempted to employ what Dalland (2020) refers to as being consciously naïve while interviewing. By being openminded and curious and perhaps a little naïve, you may get valuable answers you would not have gotten otherwise. That is not to say that I tried to conceive my participants. I did my best to ask questions in a respectful and honest manner and thought about whether I would have wanted to be interviewed in a similar fashion (Dalland 2020, p. 66).

It is the researcher's job to get access to the knowledge that is held by the participants (Ryen, 2002, p.106). During the interviews I attempted to create a safe environment where the participants could share their phenomenological knowledge about burnout. I started asking simple questions to begin with, avoiding going directly to their experiences of burnout. An interview is not just meant to be a sphere where opinions about a phenomenon are discussed and shared, it is also a way of gaining a deeper understanding that in turn can contribute to knowledge (Dalland, 2020, p. 68). It is therefore important that the researcher thinks through how the interviews are to be analyzed afterwards. This ensure that both the interview-guide and the questions asked during the interview fit the analyzing method (Dalland 2020, p. 68). The way I solved this was to follow the interview guide as close as possible and ask similar follow-up questions to every participant.

3.7 Selecting participants

In qualitative studies the selection of participants is a critical aspect of the research process I used my network to recruit most of the participants, and I got tips about reaching out to certain organizations. In qualitative studies it is normal to have smaller selections, because the aim of qualitative studies is generally not to imitate reality and make generalized claims, but to get access to participants views and meaning making of the world around them (Ryen, 2002, p.85). Thus, the selection in this research consists of five working individuals who are aged from 30 to 61 years old, of those two of the participants were men, and three women.

The participants were selected strategically based on their experience with burnout to ensure that they would have the ability to reflect and comment on the phenomenon (Tjora, 2012, p.145). The only criteria I had was that they had some subjective experience with burnout. The majority of the participants (3) were working in health care, while one participant worked with wages, and the last participant were a leader of an organization. I recruited participants who had some experience with burnout, but the participants were not expected to have any prior knowledge about burnout.

3.8 Interview guide

I wanted to conduct a semi-structured interview when talking with my participants. The reason being that it is easier to enable reciprocity between myself and the participants that can contribute to more trust and thus more honesty. The semi-structured interview also allow flexibility in improvising follow-up questions, as well as giving room for the individuals own personal experiences (Kallio et al, 2016).

Kallio and colleagues (2016) propose that the creation of a semi-structured has five stages which I believe fit with how I experienced my process of creating the interview-guide:

(1) identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews.

The first step of my process was to evaluate whether it was appropriate to use a semi-structured interview to explore my research question. I considered a more structured interview with fixed questions but decided against it because I wanted the participants experiences to be able to impact the direction of the interviews more. A semi-structured interview is "[…] well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers" (Barriball & While, 1994, p.330). Burnout is both a complex and sensitive topic and is why I wanted the flexibility that the semi-structured interview provides. The semi-structured interview is also suitable when participants are questioned about subjects they are not used to be talking about (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2959). It is often difficult to admit to being burned out, so this spoke in favor of a semi-structured interview.

(2) retrieving and using previous knowledge.

Before writing the interview guide, I had done extensive work to better understand the phenomenon of burnout. On top of reading countless articles about it, I consulted people in my network that had experience with burnout to get a broader understanding of the phenomenon before conducting the interviews.

(3) formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide.

The semi-structured interview is meant to be a tool for collecting data material. The guide should then aim to direct the conversation toward the research topic during the interview (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2960). I worked on making my interview-guide as clear as possible without asking overly directional questions in order to achieve the richest possible data (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2960).

(4) pilot testing the guide.

The interview guide was pilot tested on a participant who agreed to be interviewed about their experience with burnout. This enabled me to make corrections to the interview-guide and get information about the integrity of the research as well as test my own abilities to collect data in a satisfying and ethical way (Kallio et al., 2016, p.2960). I discovered that the person I talked to in the pilot interview did not particularly like the term *burnout* because it gave off unwanted associations. After this discovery I asked every participant early in the interview about what they thought about the term.

(5) presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide.

The final phase of creating a semi-structured interview guide is presenting the guide, which can be found in the appendix. The process culminates with the goal "[…]to produce a clear, finished and logical semi-structured interview guide for data collection" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2961). The final presentation enables the researcher to argue for choices they have made throughout the process and makes it clear that the interview-guide is created carefully and scientifically which bolster its credibility.

The interview guide was created after reviewing earlier research and discovering themes that enabled me to explore the participants phenomenological experiences of burnout. It can be examined under **appendix B**. The next step of the process was to transcribe the five interviews to enable the analysis.

3.9 Transcription

Transcribing the interviews is a procedure meant to remind the researcher what was talked about in the interview. It helps the researcher sort through the data and find recurring themes and structure the data in a meaningful way. When transcribing it the researcher need to make choices between what level of detail the transcription should have (McLellan et al., 2003). I transcribed the data material as detailed as possible and tried to preserve as much of the conversation as possible.

I imported the transcribed interviews in an analysis program called Nvivo for further coding and analysis purposes.

3.10 Thematic analysis

I have employed a thematic analysis in this research. Braun and Clarke (2006) write that thematic analysis (TA) is *only* a method of data analysis, which can be seen as a strength because it is not bound by the rigidity of being a methodological approach.

TA is a method for analysis that deals with "[…] systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2011). The purpose of TA is to identify patterns of meaning *across* data, which means that a single item is insufficient for TA. In this project I have conducted several interviews and I have used TA to find meaning across these interviews.

As mentioned earlier, I chose an inductive approach when employing TA in this research. This approach is described by Braun and Clarke (2012):

> […] inductive TA often is experiential in its orientation and essentialist in its theoretical framework, assuming a knowable world and "giving voice" to experiences and meanings of that world, as reported in the data. (p. 59)

As with the phenomenological method above, the aim of inductive TA is to *give voice* to the experiences that are presented in the data which is something I want to achieve in this paper. Joffe (2011) claim that thematic analysis fit particularly well with a phenomenological approach because the fact that phenomenology provides a very clear approach to the research object and the method for gathering data but is less clear when it comes to providing a method of analysis is complemented by the openness and flexibility of TA as it is a more structural analysis method. With TA I get the tools I needed for the analysis, while being able to maintain the focus on the experiential field that other analysis may lack. I argue that the mutual goal of giving voice to experiences that are present in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2011; Sloan & Bowe, 2014) make the combination of TA and phenomenology well suited to answer the research question of this paper.

3.10.1 Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) have a very informative table to describe the process of analysis using TA that I present below. These six steps provided me with a useful guide on how to analyze the data and will be helpful when I describe the process of analyzation.

Table 1, *phases of thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

In the initial phase of familiarizing myself with the data, the aim was to immerse myself in the data despite having specific interests and initial ideas about what may eventually emerge from the data. As mentioned earlier, this is the part of the process where I worked with bracketing my knowledge, and instead focused on getting familiar with the data. The process of transcribing the data may be time consuming, but Braun and Clarke (2006) note that it also is an excellent way of familiarizing with the data. I had to do an initial transcription, then read, re-listen and re-read the data before I was satisfied with the result. This contributed greatly to my eventual familiarization with the data.

I then generated initial codes i.e., meaningful elements in the data, that seemed interesting and worthwhile to pursue (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The initial codes were scattered pieces of information to begin with, but they slowly started to build up to a meaningful representation of the participants experiences.

After the initial coding-phase I started searching for more broader themes by looking at patterns and connections in the data. I started by putting similar codes together in a table, to get a better overlook, a thematic map of sorts. After reviewing, revisiting, and refining several of the themes I realized that I had started out with very descriptive themes, but as I remained open and curious to the data more elaborate themes emerged.

When I had themes that fit together with the rest of the data, I started naming the themes, and defined why they mattered to answer the research question of this paper. Then the work of producing the findings report, which can be found in the next chapter.

3.11 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in qualitative research often revolve around the issue of doing a personal inquiry, and then publishing these publicly (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 463). Working with material or records of people's intimate thoughts raises some ethical challenges, one example from this paper was when two participants explicitly asked me to leave out specific information that could have been relevant to the paper, but which I ended up removing because the information were very personal and could lead to the identification of the participants. Working with an intimate data material gives the opportunity to let marginalized voices be heard, but I did not want to overstep the participants boundaries (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017).

The ethical challenge of qualitative research intertwines with its possibilities. Brinkmann and Kvale (2017) refer to Christians (2005) who writes about the research mission in social science. Its justification for existence is for it to help society flourish.
A main principle for research is that it should do no harm. And if it causes any harm, that the benefit of the research far outweighs the inflicted harm. By asking participants about difficult situations in their life, I might have inflicted some harm by making participants relive uncomfortable memories, but I was careful to ask the participants whether they felt it was okay to talk about certain topics before asking my questions.

This research has been approved by Sikt, who have clear guidelines on ethical research practices which I familiarized myself with before conducting the research. The approval can be examined under **appendix A**.

3.12 Informed consent

Informed consent means that the participants in the study *actually* understand what they are agreeing to participate in, and what voluntary participation entails (Dalland, 2020, p. 173). I gave my participant a written letter of consent (see **appendix C**) where they got information about the project and what it meant for them to participate. The participants were informed that their consent could be withdrawn at any time. The letter of consent was approved by Sikt, who is a privacy protection service that verify the content of research material such as the letter of consent sent out for this research.

3.13 Audio recording

It is very common to record interviews in qualitative research because there are many advantages. Recording an interview means it is possible to replay it and improve the transcripts, and it also preserves details about pattern of speech and sequence of talk

(Silverman, 2020, p. 352). The context of an utterance is also preserved, which means that an utterance can always be checked in relation to what probed the response (Silverman, 2020, p. 353). With the participants consent, I recorded every interview to preserve as much detail as possible. The data were either recorded on an app that sent the files directly to an encrypted storage service, or on an offline recording device.

3.14 Anonymity

Participants have the right to anonymity. Data is anonymous when it is not possible to link the data to the individual (Dalland, 2020, p. 172). The participants in my study were promised anonymity, thus several measures were taken to ensure this. All participants were given the chance to pick a fictious name before starting the interview, this was to ensure that they never used their own name while being recorded nor was their real name used in the transcription. Details such as the name of their workplace, private information etc., has been left out or changed so it will not be possible to trace the data back to the participants.

My project touches on some sensitive information regarding current or past employment. I am bound by confidentiality, and do not discuss any of the information conveyed to me with anyone. When the paper was finished, identification details and data material were permanently deleted.

3.15 Reliability, Reflexivity & The role of the researcher

Reliability has to do with the internal logic applied throughout the research project (Tjora, 2012, p.202). Some argue that for a research project to be reliable, other researchers who apply the same logic in a different research project will find the same results (Silverman, 2020, p.89), although this mostly applies to quantitative studies. The more general way of thinking about reliability is the varying degree of which "[…] the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production" (Silverman, 2020, p.89). These criteria can be difficult to apply to research that use interviewing as a method of data-gathering. In my project, I have recorded every interview and transcribed them in full as to not miss questions that provoked answers from my participants (Silverman, 2020, p.93).

For some, the researchers' opinions and engagement in the project is regarded as unnecessary noise, while others argue that this can be a strength when applied correctly (Tjora, 2012, p.203). To ensure that the research is reliable despite the researcher's influence on the research it is important to reflect on how we got to our interpretation of the data. For this reason, I started to keep a research journal from the day I conducted my pilot-interview. Keeping a journal enabled me to examine my personal assumptions, biases influence to and be reflexive to them (Ahern, 1999). This has helped me to write out ideas and thoughts throughout the project and revisit them later to see what affected my process. By keeping a research journal, my reflexivity and awareness of different influences was strengthened.

3.16 Validity

To review whether this paper is valid or not, the reader must verify whether the answers given in this paper actually deal with the research question of the paper (Tjora, 2012, p.206).

Every research project is subjected to critique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2017, p. 171). There is general consensus in that researchers should write about their research in a way that is transparent and demonstrate that their research is credible by giving access to their research process and method (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Tjora, 2012, p.202). To enable others to make a verdict about a research projects validity, the reader should be able to scrutinize every part of the process. I welcome this scrutiny, because others might discover flaws that can be rectified and, more generally, the research becomes more trustworthy.

3.17 Generalizability

When it comes to qualitative research it does not always make sense to write about generalizability, but rather transferability. Although some scholars believe talking about transferability is unnecessary or even unfortunate (Tjora, 2012, p. 208). This is because introducing a new term about an already established criteria is viewed as unnecessary. I will instead present a different approach to generalizability.

Payne and Williams write that "to generalize is to claim that what is the case in one place or time, will be so elsewhere or in another time" (Payne, Williams, 2005, p.296). This definition of generalization does not necessarily hold true for this study. Instead, I work with what is referred to as *moderatum* generalizations (Payne & Williams, 2005; Tjora, 2012). This is a moderate form of generalization, which means that the findings of a study should not be taken as axiomatic generalizations (Payne & Williams, 2005, p. 297). Studies who claim moderate generalization do not attempt to produce statements that are supposed hold true over longer periods of time, or across cultures. Nor are the generalization claim meant to be absolute but are instead open to be refuted because of change in the world such political or in this case work-related changes (Payne & Williams, 2005, p. 297).

Payne and Williams (2005) stress that moderate generalization should be a conscious process, in which the researcher is actively "[…] constructing externally valid and unambiguous generalization […]" (p. 297). Findings in this study support existing research on burnout and earlier research show similar results, this is why I claim that this study has moderate generalizability. I have worked consciously to be transparent so that others who try to replicate the study may have similar findings.

4. Findings

In this chapter I will present what I have discovered about the five participants experience with burnout using a thematic analysis with a phenomenological approach. After analyzing the data, I categorized the findings in four main themes:

1. Identifying with burnout?
2. Stigmatization & Marginalization.
3. Contributing factors.
4. Making sense of the experience.

The categories have subthemes that reflect the most central themes in each category. Each theme looks at different aspects of the participants experience with burnout, but they are linked together in that they each give a glimpse into what it is like to have lived experience with burnout that may give clues on how to prevent it.

4.1 Identifying with burnout?

I asked every participant what they thought about the term burnout, and later asked them to freely define burnout toward the end of the interviews. The participants for the most part accepted the term, but rarely used it themselves during the interviews. This theme presents how participants of this study describe their experience phenomenologically when they were asked about the theoretical term burnout. It also shows how most participants use different language and metaphors to describe their experience.

4.1.1. Lack of clarity

The first thing I noticed in the data was the apparent lack of consensus about what burnout means. One participant explicitly talked about wanting more clarity around burnout, he questioned whether we have the same mutual understanding about what the term refers to when we use it in everyday language. The same participant spoke about how his views were influenced by a professor in psychology:

> *If you are burned out then you are finished, there is a pile of ashes lying there, something has been completely burned, right?* (Roger)

Roger said that he had the impression that the terms *burnout* and *tired* have a tendency to get mixed up. Being tired is something that can and will happen to everyone. Or, to use the words of the participant:

> *[…] that's the way the world is, that's the way life is.* (Roger)

When I probed further about what he thinks of burnout himself, he added that he believed that if you really are burned out, then: *[…] you're in the fetal position, then it's almost game over.* (Roger). Roger describes burnout as a very severe condition something that should not be used too lightly to describe a situation. There can often be misunderstandings around topics that are used both in everyday language and in more practical or diagnostical ways. An example of this is depression. It is quite common in everyday language to say that you are feeling a bit depressed while what is really meant by that is that the person is feeling sad or bummed out as opposed to being clinically depressed.

4.1.2 Lack of continuity

Another participant view was that being burned out is not equivalent to that it is game over; it does not mean you do not have a chance to redeem yourself:

> *But if I had been burned out, I wouldn't have been able to start burning again, but I do. It was more like running full speed and then suddenly, bang.* (Nina)

This is an illustrative metaphor that captures a different language to describe burnout. If one burns out, it implies that there are only ashes left, nothing to really rekindle a flame with. However, Nina very much felt that she had started burning again after her experience with burnout. She explained that if she were to describe her experience, it would be more like running full speed and then suddenly hitting a wall. A more straightforward metaphor that implies a sudden crash and injury, something it is possible to recover from.

When asked to describe burnout freely, using her own words, Nina started to describe how she identified with being burned out, but she struggled to find the right words. I then tried to help her find a different way to formulate what she wanted to say and told her that *you can describe it a bit more if you want, rather than using a word you can try to describe it instead.* (Researcher). She responded that:

> *Death comes up all the time. Not death, but like. I think it's death, from something. From here on it must be something completely different.* (Nina)

Death is the cessation of life, yet the death described by Nina was not a departure from life but rather a departure from what had been, and a wish for things to change for the better. To continue working under the conditions that were the cause of her problems would be impossible, so she would have to change the situation and start anew.

In Greek mythology, the phoenix bird combusts when it dies in a show of flames and is then reborn out of the ashes. Burnout gives the impression that it is an end, it is not possible to continue after the experience. But like the phoenix bird, most of the participants bounced back after their experience rather than turning into a pile of ashes completely unable to continue, they learned various strategies to cope.

Bente described burnout more like a common disease, that it is something that it is possible to recover from.

> *for me it feels like being terribly tired, and. A bit of a flu feeling at times, and downcast.* (Bente)

With the flu it is likely that if you take some time off work and take care of yourself and rest enough it will not lead to serious consequences. And so, burnout appear to be something that the participants identify with, but the experience of burnout is described in ways that gives hope of recovery. It is not and end but rather something that pass, like the flu.

This theme provide insight into the general understanding of burnout from the perspective of people who have experienced it. It highlights the associations and the subjective understanding of the more theoretical term that is used throughout this paper.

4.2 Stigmatization & marginalization

The next theme I will present involves the participants experience with speaking up about their symptoms, and how they were met when doing so. Even though work-stress and burnout are widespread in the working population, the participants in this study experienced what has been interpreted as marginalization. One possible reason for this is that it is not uncommon to feel tired or exhausted without leading to more serious consequences and that it is therefore often dismissed. In cases where it leads to burnout a different approach is required because those who experience it may need more support. Unfortunately, many of the participants experienced that it was difficult to gain recognition when trying to explain their situation at their workplace.

The difficulties of calling in sick because of exhaustion was reflected in several of the responses from the participants. Kaja talked about her experience with calling in sick and being met with an unsupportive response:

> *I remember that there were a few times when I called in and told them that I was ill where I got quite a sour grumpy response. So that didn't make it any easier.* (Kaja)

The response she got when she called in sick made it even more difficult to cope with her situation. There was a lack of understanding from the workplace. If the reason for taking calling had been the flu it is likely that it would have been more accepted, and the response would have been more understanding. Instead she found herself in a situation where voicing her concerns ended up causing more stress.

Another participant explicitly said that her impression is that it is not accepted to call in sick if you are having symptoms of burnout:

> *It's not ok, it's not ok to say at work that you're on sick leave because you're burnt out or tired.* (Bente)

Bente added that she is happy at her workplace and with her colleagues, but that it is common to feel tired there. So, when you are tired to the point of exhaustion and burnout, there is less understanding to call in sick because of it. This marginalizes the problem and make it difficult to take preventative actions when symptoms of burnout appear.

4.2.1 Stating an alternative reason for their illness

Another finding that reflect the essence of this theme are several exchanges where participants talked about reporting a more recognized reason for being ill:

> *I had the shoulder operation that I was waiting for. So, I went and waited, or held out until then. Because then I knew that I was going to be on sick leave for a while and get a break and then we'll see what happens.* (Kaja)

This approach was found in several other participants where they gave a more concrete physical reason for calling in sick instead of explaining that they were experiencing symptoms of burnout. They opted to reference a more permissive reason for taking time off work because it probably demands less explanation for it to be accepted as a valid reason to be sick. Roger recalled a similar situation where he experienced both physical and psychological symptoms but chose to report the physical symptoms.

Mm, yes. I don't think I went straight to what the reality was, because at the time it was also probably about my neck and shoulder starting to hurt. So, it is easier to refer to that: "there is so much commuting, I drive so much". (Roger)

Roger said that he got physical symptoms, such as muscle knots, when things were stressful. This is a concrete symptom that has less stigma because anyone can understand that having a hurting body can leave you unable to work. Resorting to report only the more easily permissible symptoms can be a way to work around the issue of not being taken seriously by having to explain a more complex condition, intuitively a very rational decision.

Not talking about the actual reason for being ill seemed to be a common occurrence among the participants. This can have the unfortunate consequence that when fewer workers voice that they are experiencing burnout, it is less likely that the workplace will take action to prevent it. Why work on a problem that on paper does not exist? When burnout is not brought up, those who experience it may end up thinking that they are abnormal because it has not been brought up as a normal response to chronic work stress before.

Just a year or two ago. Then they talked about burnout. That it could happen in the profession we are in. It was the first time in, yes, fifteen years. As a nurse I hear about it. (Kaja)

Without the reassurance that burnout is something that can happen to you, and the knowledge that it actually is quite prevalent in certain professions it is perhaps not surprising that the participants stated different grounds for having to take sick-leave.

4.2.2 From marginalized to acute

In the data it appears that burnout is rarely brought up unless participants have symptoms that lead to severe physical or mental issues in their lives. Several participants described that at some point it became impossible to not address their situation. Typically, their symptoms went from being something that could be dismissed as regular tiredness or otherwise normal reactions to stress, to becoming overwhelming.

Nina described an experience where she got a strong physical reaction, she had had enough and was overwhelmed.

[…] then I started crying and my body started shaking, completely uncontrollably, it was a physical collapse. (Nina)

After this experience, it was evident that something had to change, a wake-up call that this was serious. The situation had been somewhat manageable up until that point, but that changed when her body came to a complete stop.

In another interview it was described that burning out takes time, it builds up slowly and when the bubble eventually bursts, burnout can appear to have come out of nowhere.

that's what's so strange. I managed to stay relatively decent until the bang and then I slept for four days. (Ken)

Having the impression that things are going fairly well and then crashing appear to be the most common progression among the participants in this study. The symptoms are first brushed aside as normal reactions to stress both by the participants and then the workplace, then it slowly builds up before it becomes so severe that it cannot be overlooked anymore.

4.3 Contributing factors

Burnout is often a slow process and there are many factors that contribute to speed up or slow down the process. This theme presents the findings from the data about what factors the participants describe as contributing to their burnout.

4.3.1 Role ambiguity

When I asked the participants about what had been the most stressful at work, the first thing I noticed was that several participants reported that their personal believes about what doing a good job conflicted with other colleagues' values or views. Bente talked about that it was stressful when her colleagues and herself disagreed on:

> *[…] what is a good job and what do my colleagues think is a good job, and, and that conflict there, or there hasn't been a conflict but that disagreement there I think has been stressful.* (Bente)

When it is unclear what it entails to do a good job, it became stressful. Work tasks are often not defined rigorously which give some autonomy to employees. The tradeoff is that personal values may conflict with the wiggle room that is left out in the job description.

Kaja talked about how she sometimes experienced that her colleagues had a different view on how to work with patients and that it was difficult to be in a situation where her values conflicted with how others acted:

> *yes, it has a lot to do with my values, i.e. how I feel it is right to treat other people.* (Kaja)

When her colleagues' actions at work conflicted with how she perceived that it is right to treat others it contributed to stress. How a colleague treats a patient, or a customer may be within professional boundaries, but an interaction can still be perceived by colleagues as handled poorly, it then becomes a matter of values regarding how to treat other people.

Ambiguity of what doing a good enough job may also come as a result of under communicating what is expected. Sometimes an employer may not explicitly say what he or she expects from an employee, this can leave a lot of unanswered questions which can lead to stress and frustration.

> *[…] it may be that I have my heart in my throat and think that I have now spent two hours on something that I should have spent three quarters of an hour on. I end up feeling that no, now the customer must pay a lot and the boss thinks that I am lazy. And then it may be that my boss thought we could spend four hours on it, and I spent two, and then I sit there and have a bad conscience, then I don't really know anything, I don't really know what this is like.* (Nina)

Nina was unaware of how much time she was expected to spend on a given work task and ended up stressing about spending too much time on her tasks. Unclarity on what is expected when it comes to time management, how to interact with clients, or generally what doing a good enough job is contributed to stress for several of the participants in this study.

4.3.2 Balance private and work life

Burnout is supposed to be something you experience that are strictly related to work. Yet the line between work-life and private-life is becoming increasingly blurred. Almost every participant reported that their private life had something to do with their burnout, or that their burnout affected their private life in some ways. Symptoms of burnout are present at home, and may contribute to stress in the private sphere, while stress at home may pour over into the working sphere.

> *Things get mixed up a bit, what happens at work and in private life, doesn't it. You kind of carry that feeling that you never get to do what you should have done.* (Roger)

One participant described the situation at home when she was exhausted and had to focus on preserving energy in order to fulfill important obligations.

> *But it was a chore to, in a way, get up and deliver children to school and kindergarten and. Yes, when I was at home during the day, I didn't do much. I just sat and relaxed and felt that I had to catch up, that I had to save energy for after school and kindergarten when the children were going home. Because it takes some energy to just have the kids in the house.* (Kaja)

The exhaustion was in this case not primarily related to her situation at work, but it spilled over to work and vice versa. It became a struggle to stay afloat because there was not enough energy to do what was expected of her. When asked how this situation affected her, she responded that:

> *no, it doesn't give you that feeling of mastery that you master life at all with neither work nor children.* (Kaja)

She felt a lack of mastery over her life, that she was not mastering neither work nor children because she was exhausted, a common theme among the participants. Another participant described her situation as having several roles, which all entail giving a lot of yourself.

> *When you're in a job like that, you give a lot of yourself, and it takes a lot when you're in a lot at home too, it's double up.* (Bente)

Having obligations at home with children, old and ill parents etc., were factors that on top of a stressful work environment contributed to a worsening of the participants symptoms of burnout. They could not come home and focus only on themselves because they had to spend energy at home as well.

Several participants reported that their symptoms first got picked up at home.

> *It also affected my partner. She thought it was unpleasant that I was walking around looking so gloomy and being so dark.* (Ken)

People who know us privately such as partners, family and friends notice that there is something going on and can be important for noticing and doing something with the symptoms of burnout.

[…] mom noticed it […] she was worried, she saw that I was not happy. (Bente)

These finding voices the importance of giving weight to the private sphere in the process of burnout. The participants had many roles: husband, wife, mother, boss, employee, caregiver etc., these are intertwined and affect each other and can contribute to stress alone or in combination when not managed well.

4.3.3 A change in work culture

Another finding is that participants reported that their workplaces often focused more on the operation of the workplace than on them as an individual. Several participants reported that they experienced a more general shift in the work culture that may have contributed to their burnout, while others spoke about work culture in general as a contributor to work stress.

> *Today's working life is a bit like that, the margins are so small that they bet on that their employees will fix it in one way or another, and it mostly works, because most people are hungry and want to do a good job and they swing around and are being creative and stuff like that. Some more than others, and then there are a couple, some that gets burnt out, meets the wall.* (Nina)

This describes a situation at work where the company on the one hand have faith in that their employees will manage to handle a situation with low margins, but that it on the other hand can be quite stressful to do so. Most people are eager enough to make it work, but others may succumb to the pressure and experience burnout instead.

Kaja described a similar experience where she perceived that the work culture has changed to be more impersonal. This ended up making her feel undervalued and replaceable.

> *You are there like a machine that will only do your job and you will go home, there is nothing like. Yeah, there is no such thing as a birthday greeting like it used to be, or condolence flowers on the door. You're just there as a piece. That's what I feel at least.* (Kaja)

The lack of personal interest in her made her feel like just a piece in the workplace, not a valued employee. If she were to become sick or experience loss in her family, she had the perception that her employer would not show an interest in that. On the contrary, Ken had experienced that his boss had showed a personal interest in his wellbeing and reported that it had had a positive impact on his recovery.

> *He often called when I was home, asked how I was doing […] he met me in a very, very nice way.* (Ken)

Small things like calling and checking in on how he was doing while on sick leave was highly appreciated by Ken. However, Ken also added that after changing to a different job he also felt that the work culture was more focused on the organization than the employees.

> *[…] they are more concerned about how they will solve the operational problem.* (Ken)

Ken's experience was that when talking about sick leave and other occupational problems, the management quickly started to worry about the possible operational problems related to the situation, rather than what may be underlying structural problems. Bente also described that her employer focused more on the organization than on her as a person.

> *They become too preoccupied with operations rather than thinking about how we get work done in everyday life.* (Bente)

Several participants thus report a similar experience at their work where their employer's attention is focused on the operation of the organization, and that the cost of that is that the participants end up feeling neglected. They are not as important and thus some end up feeling like just another piece in the organization rather than a valuable resource or asset for the organization.

4.4 Making sense of the experience

When asked to reflect on how the burnout had impacted them, and how they functioned at work today, the responses were mostly positive. Having gone through the experience had given most of them important knowledge about themselves, their boundaries, values and how to cope with work-related stress. This theme presents several participants extended understanding of themselves and how burnout have affected them, a retrospective look at the process.

After having gone through burnout and coming out on the other side, several participants reported that they had learned things about themselves that were useful going forward.

> *In retrospect, I'm very happy about it, because I think I've learned a lot since I was lucky enough to come to that psychologist who was a wonderful lady. Who helped me through and through, I have learned a lot as a person and I think that I have the same situation at work now, but I cope very well. I also say things that I think about, or I have learned to say no.* (Nina)

Nina had essentially the same situation at work now as she had when she experienced burnout, but by working through it she was able to cope with the situation in a healthier manner. This highlights the importance of knowledge when it comes to burnout. If more people were aware of the signs and symptoms of burnout and that it was easier and more acceptable to talk about burnout, perhaps more people would be able to cope more successfully with their situation.

Having said that, another participant's retrospective reflections revealed that some things need to be learned rather than taught. *I didn't believe in that diagnosis until I experienced it myself.* (Ken). After his experience with burnout, he would come to believe that hitting the wall is something that can have a big impact on your life.

> *I have very good experience. I do have that. The reality, and actually listening to the body and prioritizing oneself. It's nothing you, it's nothing to joke about. Because it's not cool to hit the wall, it's really not cool.* (Ken)

Ken had learned that prioritizing and listening to his own body is important because the alternative, to ignore signs of exhaustion and stress, can lead to hitting the wall. This participant further talked about becoming better at setting boundaries for himself so that he would be forced to not overwork himself and getting good support from his boss, hence the reference to having a good experience overall. These skills and insights were acquired as a result of experiencing burnout.

In relation to learning new skills and acquiring insight, another participant talked about her experience with a course she had attended when she was on sick leave where she had learned about things such as:

> *[…] how to fill up with energy and not just that it should be drained.* (Kaja)

And further reflected upon her learning process:

> *Because it's something, it's a bit strange that you haven't learned it after forty years […].* (Kaja)

During her sick leave, Kaja had learned to set boundaries that would help her limit some of the activities she did so she would not become as tired. After forty years no one had taught her how to avoid being drained of energy. But as a result of her sick leave due to burnout she attended a course that actually put focus on these things. She was probably not completely unaware of the importance of these things before being burned out, but during her recovery she became more aware of the importance of setting boundaries to reduce stress and focus more on recharging her batteries.

4.4.1 After the burnout

The fear of experiencing it again was prevalent in many of the participants. Having gone through the experience was one thing, but going back was not an option.

> *I have reflected on things, that I will never go there again, it is not worth it.* (Nina)

There is a possibility of relapsing into old habits and coping mechanisms, but to this participant, as with others, it was not worth it. In a way it seems as if most of the participants have become wise of learning from the experience and respect the effect it has had on their lives and refuse to go back.

> *[…] it's a long, long and hard way back. And you have to take things step by step, it takes so long. It may be that you feel you have more energy, and that there is something you can do. Exercise, and then it's right back again. It is, it is like. No, it's a tough road back.* (Ken)

I have written that burnout can be a long process, but the road back is also long. The people I interviewed had taken between four weeks, up to over a year of sick leave to get back to work, a significant amount of time to be able to function regularly again. Some participants still experienced symptoms, but most had recovered almost fully.

Bente spoke about a fear of having burnout symptoms that could leave her unable to continue working at all.

> *I'm afraid of becoming cynical. I'm afraid not to. To lose my empathy because I'm afraid of that. That's my worst fear, because then I think I won't be able to work anymore.* (Bente)

Bente was aware that some people may become cynical when affected by burnout and feared ending up cynical herself. The thought of losing her empathy made her fear she would be unable to continue working with people. However, she added that:

> *Yes, I'm afraid to react like that. Although I don't think so, because I'll probably get tired instead.* (Bente)

Although cynicism is one of the dimensions of burnout, this participant anticipated that she would only experience exhaustion or tiredness. From her experience that was her most prominent response to work stress, but at the same time she was afraid of the cynical symptoms that may be lurking in relation to exhaustion.

In the next chapter I will elaborate and discuss the findings in relation to the theoretical chapter to unravel its implications.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to gain insight about burnout by exploring what it is like to experience it. The theoretical framework has been laid out, and the findings of the research have been presented. It is now time to dive deeper into what implications this may have for the problem statement of this paper: *What is the subjective experience of burnout among working individuals, and what might help reduce its prevalence?*

Through the subjective experiences of the participants, it has been possible to look at the perceived causes of burnout, the psychological and physical effects it has had on them and generate knowledge that can inform workplace and worker alike on how to deal with it. Through this research I hope to contribute to give a stronger voice to the phenomenon. In the analysis of the data, I have identified several key themes that I will summarize before starting the discussion.

5.1 Summary of findings

The participants mostly endorsed the use of burnout, but pointed to a lack of clarity around what exactly it refers to. In everyday language, burnout can have very negative connotations, which made some of the participants hesitant to use it themselves. However, when they were given a chance to describe their experiences, their descriptions complemented the existing theoretical framework on burnout. One important finding in the data is that when they spoke about how it had been to seek out help to cope with burnout, participants in this study described how they met some resistance when they brought up symptoms of burnout at work. Their perception is that there is still some stigma around burnout, and in the analysis, this has been interpreted to lead to its marginalization.

The factors that contributed to burnout varied from individual to individual. The participants experienced that a lack of a mutual understanding of what it means to do a good job made it stressful to be at the workplace, I named this theme role ambiguity to reflect the uncertainty as stressful. Balancing work and private life were another factor that was frequently brought up. Having important roles and obligations both privately and professionally was stressful because both demanded energy and attention that can feel draining when there are not enough resources to do both sufficiently well. Work culture was another factor that was frequently brought up, reflected in how participants described how their employers at times fail to support the interpersonal relationship between employer and employee. The last finding was that most participants learned a lot about themselves during their recovery period and reported to have gained knowledge that have enabled them to cope better with stress.

In the following sections I will discuss these findings and elaborate on the implications of these findings and improve the understanding of burnout to be better equipped to deal with it.

5.2 Identifying with burnout, does it matter?

From a theoretical perspective the answer to what it is like to experience depends on what theoretical framework you use. It is either presented as exhaustion alone, or in combination with depersonalization and reduced professional efficacy. These dimensions represent different areas that affected the participants well-being and that ultimately led to various struggles and health problems for the participants in this study such as lack of sleep, anxiety, depression, and nervous breakdowns to name a few. However, it is important to not conflate burnout with other forms of workplace stress, burnout is distinct in that it is specifically related to workplace stressors (Maslach & leiter, 2016).

I want to clarify that I do not intend to suggest that the participants in this study bear responsibility for their burnout, nor do I suggest that their workplaces are solely responsible. The aim of this paper is not to determine whether burnout is caused by organizational factors, individual factors, or a combination of the two. Instead, the purpose is to understand the experiences of individuals who have gone through burnout and recovered, and to explore the implications of their experiences.

Many reported feelings of failure because they felt that they were not doing a good enough job, or because they did not have enough energy to contribute positively at work or at home which eventually led to their inability to cope with their situation. The result was that most of the participants had to be on sick leave for months, and some were away from work for over a year. This may indicate that they were having normal reactions to unnormal conditions, that is, that the environment they are working in was unhealthy and that what they have been dealing with are organizational issues (Rösing, 2003). But research also indicate that personal factors can be predictors of burnout, such as neuroticism, perfectionism, or having more negative affect (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013). The discussion of whether to approach burnout focusing on individual or systemic issues will be had later. For now, what all the participants had in common was that they for one reason or another ended up unable to continue working for a while because of symptoms of burnout.

Exploring how the participants identify with burnout gives a glimpse into how it has been to deal with it. That is why I asked them to describe the phenomenon themselves based on their lived experiences. Identifying with burnout (or not) may impact an individual’s willingness to reach out to others for support or seek professional help. If burnout is perceived as a personal failure, an individual may be less likely to reach out as the negative situation may be perceived as self-inflicted and perhaps a little shameful which can worsen the situation and prolong the recovery period (Engebretsen & Bjorbækmo, 2020).

Additionally, whether individuals who are affected by burnout identify with the term may have implications for their ability to cope with it. If an individual has the impression that being burned out is synonymous with laying in a fetal position or becoming a pile of ashes while at the same time having milder symptoms of burnout, it is possible that earlier symptoms of burnout will be dismissed as mere tiredness because burnout represents something more dramatic to them than what it really is. Earlier stages of burnout are less severe, thus how burnout develops should be communicated to workers and workplaces so that individuals more correctly can identify whether they are affected by it or not. There are countless symptoms related to burnout which can make it difficult to identify whether you are affected or not (Melamed et al. 1999; World Health Organization 2008). Understanding the symptoms and what they represent would enable individuals to assess their situation more accurately and enable more appropriate actions to deal with it.

Burnout cannot exist in a theoretical vacuum; it should represent the reality of those who are affected by it. Solely theoretically, burnout is classically understood as a three-dimensional condition, but it can also be considered a social construct as it is also affected by social and cultural factors such as workplace culture, social expectations, and social values. One way to decrease the gap between theory and lived experience is through phenomenological research that can provide insight into the phenomenon and make the concept clearer. From this discussion I argue that it does matter that individuals identify as being burned out because it provides a more solid explanation of their condition and a clearer path towards recovery. Burnout is a concrete issue with serious consequences, but it is at the same time a complex phenomenon to conceptualize theoretically, which will be discussed next.

5.3 Conceptual issues

One reason for the issues of identifying with burnout may be that it is problematic to conceptualize it. There is theoretical division on how to measure it (Maslach et al., 1996; Kristensen et al., 2005; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Salmela-Aro et al., 2010). There is disagreement on the causality of burnout, especially whether it is primarily caused by organizational factors such as workload and organizational culture (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), or rather individual factors such as personality and individual coping strategies (Aydemir & Icelli, 2013; Shimizutani et al., 2008). There is also a lack of longitudinal studies on burnout, which is needed to make the research more robust (Maslach et al., 2001). There is little doubt that stress is causing burnout and health issues in the working population, but the question of how we should deal with it and conceptualize it remain partly unresolved.

I argue that recent developments may be promising when it comes to making it more accessible for individuals who are affected by burnout to both identify as being at risk of burnout and seek help. When the WHO in May 2019 included burnout in ICD-11 many assumed that it was now recognized as a medical condition, and that this was the path forward for dealing with burnout (Moss, 2019). However, WHO quickly made a clarifying statement saying that it is an occupational *phenomenon* and *not* a medical condition (WHO, 2019). This may be seen as a loss for the prevention of burnout, but perhaps it can also be an opportunity. By adding this clarification, the WHO stress that it is not a mental disorder, but rather a response to chronic work stress which require attention from employers and policymakers. Rather than sickening those who are affected by it, this change also addresses the issue of stigmatization by focusing on the fact that it is a common workplace issue that in fact affects many individuals, an issue so common it makes its way into the ICD-11. Additionally, as an occupational phenomenon it emphasizes the importance of prevention rather than the treatment of those who are already experiencing burnout, and it clarifies who is responsible for preventing it. Rather than putting the responsibility on individuals and healthcare providers it puts the responsibility on employers and policy makers to improve work environments where chronic work-stress is prevalent.

Even though there remains some uncertainty, the recognition of burnout as an occupational phenomenon may be one step in the right direction. This could also encourage to reduce some of the stigma and consequently marginalization surrounding burnout. Because, as the findings in this paper suggest, individuals affected by burnout are to some extent being marginalized.

5.4 Marginalization, what are the consequences?

If burnout is being marginalized, it means that individuals suffering from it are not given the attention and resources that they need to overcome it. Not only is a lack of support bad for prevention but employees who feel unsupported are also more likely to experience burnout. As mentioned in the theory chapter, a lack of community is a risk factor of burnout, and without support from the community individuals can turn to anger and disengagement to cope with the stressors instead (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

What happened to several of the participants in this study is that they were unsure about how to precede when they started to experience symptoms of burnout. When they started to voice that something was wrong, they were not adequately supported which in turn created more stress. Several participants resorted to reporting different symptoms such as physical ailments instead of burnout furthering the marginalization. This is perhaps because individuals perceive that there is stigma surrounding burnout and want to avoid unpleasant encounters with the workplace.

Marginalization of burnout could fuel the symptoms further. Individuals who get inadequate support may feel like their work is not valued or appreciated which can make individuals less engaged, lower their level of productivity at work and create hopelessness. As a result, this could also lead to higher turnover and absenteeism because when unsupported employees have nowhere to turn for support a natural reaction is to seek confirmation and support elsewhere. One participant said that she had quit her job once, and that she would not hesitate next time if an untenable situation were to occur again. Research suggests that when medical students score higher on perceived stigmatization of burnout, they are less likely to seek out professional help (Dyrbye et al., 2015). This indicates that removing some of the stigmatization could potentially prove to increase the number of individuals with symptoms of burnout seeking help, and that treatment can begin earlier before it causes serious harm.

One of the symptoms that the participants in this study reported having were impaired cognitive functions. One participant reported that she could forget very banal things, such as where to put the key in the keyhole of her car. These are symptoms that could lead to serious accidents and errors at work, especially in health care where it can be very dangerous because of mismedication and other fatal errors (Hall et al., 2016). It is easy to imagine that this could have fatal consequences at other workplaces too, so having employers that are affected by burnout is not just a health issue or an economical issue, but it could also put others at unnecessary risk as well.

As is evident, marginalization of burnout can have serious consequences for employees and organizations. Many workplaces may be faced with the conundrum of preventing an almost invisible occupational phenomenon because individuals affected by burnout may opt to give other reasons for being ill, making it more difficult to assess the real issue. The individuals themselves may not be aware of why or how they are ill which make it more difficult to address. By focusing on employee's experience and creating a safe environment where employees can share their thoughts, feelings and experiences, organizations can be more proactive in preventing burnout, the first step may be to recognize and give the attention and resources that is needed to succeed in creating such an environment.

The next step is therefore to look at the factors that were identified as contributors to the participants burnout and attempt to make sense of these experiences. Thus, getting a better understanding of the situation that led up to the participants eventual onset of burnout.

5.5 Contributing factors and coping

The three main factors that were identified as contributing to burnout among the participants were role ambiguity, the balance between work life and private life and work culture. To understand the impact these factors has had on the participants I will discuss their experiences and make meaning of how coping with these factors impacted the development of burnout.

5.5.1 What is the effect of role ambiguity?

When employees do not have a clear understanding of their job responsibilities or performance expectations it can lead to role ambiguity. Kahn et al (1964) define role ambiguity as a "direct function of the discrepancy between the information available to the person and that which is required for adequate performance of his role" (p. 73). Several participants reported that they were unsure about what doing a good enough job entailed at their workplace, unsure about how they were to perform in their work they may struggle to come to terms with the uncertainty and start doubting themselves.

Zhao and Ding (2019) propose that burnout can be viewed as a "[…] conflict between the internal idealist expectations of the individual and the everyday reality" (p. 82). This conflict can be exacerbated by role ambiguity as employees may have unrealistic expectations of their job performance or lack clarity about what is expected of them. Unable to meet these expectations or know their responsibilities they experienced stress which in turn can lead to burnout. Further, when there is role ambiguity a breakdown of communication can happen if individuals do not know where to turn for support. By promoting a culture that is built on clarity and transparency organizations may contribute to individuals feeling more empowered and engaged.

5.5.2 What is the interaction between private life work, and burnout?

The participants in this study reported that it was difficult to reach out to people around them about their burnout. My perception of the participants is that they all had a social support system prior to the onset of burnout, but that due to their emotional exhaustion some of them began to withdraw from social settings in their free time. *I haven't been able to do anything social, haven't invited people home* (Bente).

In the conservation of resource model, it is argued that nonwork-related resources are relevant for burnout when these resources are threatened by high work demands (Hobfoll, 2001). Wright and colleagues (2004) suggest that consequences of an initial loss of resources can have a cascading effect of further resource loss. He suggests that when individuals are emotionally exhausted, they distance themselves from "[…] potential supportive resources that might otherwise be available […]" (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004, p. 391). The effect is that individuals withdraw from available social support and become increasingly vulnerable to further resource loss.

Experiencing loss of resources at work may affect other areas of life ultimately leading to what Hobfoll (2001) refer to as a *loss spiral*, where individuals invest resources to offset the initial loss but in turn may end up losing resources in other domains. Even though most of the paper so far has defined burnout as a purely occupational problem, the consequences may spill over into different areas of life because the effort to maintain resources drain the overall resources and may damage the protective support systems that exist in that person's life.

From this perspective burnout can be viewed as a multi-faceted phenomenon where a range of areas affect the overall development of symptoms. In the next section I will discuss how work culture played a role in developing burnout.

5.5.3 Is the work-culture changing?

D'souza and colleagues (2003) claim that the work environment is changing because of globalization and an increase in competition. This matches the findings in this paper, where several participants reported what they perceived as a change in work culture over the years. One participant commented on how she felt that her employer did not care sufficiently about her as a person, another participant said that she and her colleagues were expected to come up with creative ideas to solve difficult work situations without any extra resources from the organization. Lack of communication and support is one of the top five reasons for burnout, according to a survey by Gallup in 2018 (Wigert & Agrawal, 2018). This means that if we are going to improve conditions at work and reduce stress and consequently burnout, we should aim to create a work-culture where employees feel supported.

Burnout can impact the culture at a workplace negatively. If burnout is caused by organizational factors, it is likely that several employees may be affected. Burnout may spread between employees when more and more individuals are disengaged and lack trust, resentment can spread throughout the workplace. This impacts the morale at a workplace, team dynamics and more. This can have ripple effects into the private sphere where spouses and friends begin worrying, which in turn puts a strain on the people around them. This may cause more stress on the victims of burnout.

When participants called in sick, the main concern of the workplace was in many cases how they were going to replace the employee to secure the organizational operation and less on the well-being of their employees. This might conflict with the ideal that the employees have of what a workplace should be. Beyond paying for labor and doing labor the connection between the employee and employer matter. An employee who spends resources at work may expect something more in return other than financial compensation. Being treated fairly is an important factor at work, thus an environment where being treated what may be perceived as unfair can have a negative impact on the employees (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

5.6 Making sense of and integrating the experience

One of the key things the participants of this study learned from experiencing burnout was the importance of self-care. For several of the participants it was a wake-up call where they were forced to reevaluate their priorities and make necessary changes in their lives. Other studies have found that individuals who experience burnout often ignore the sensation of illness (Engebretsen & Bjorbækmo, 2020). The participants in this study learned to set boundaries for themselves, prioritizing their own well-being and becoming better at asking for help from others. They started to integrate their experience and learn from it. This is in line with the paradoxical theory of change, which "[…] change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not" (Beisser, 1970). It can be tempting to change behavior and attitude and continually struggle to cope with a situation that is unbearable, instead many of the participants accepted their situation, took time off work and started to find ways to make meaningful changes, and seek help.

A result from this learning may be that in the future they are more resilient and are able to recognize symptoms of stress and take preventative steps to hinder the stress from developing into burnout. Furthermore, the experience may evoke a deeper understanding about themselves, it can become clearer what is important in your own life, specifically questions regarding values, goals and purpose. Individuals may emerge stronger and more resilient after experiencing burnout because they have acquired new coping skills.

5.6.1 Preventing burnout

People are influenced in a lot of different ways by their occupation. An occupation is linked to our sense of belonging and identity. For example, being a teacher often function as an identity marker and being a teacher naturally provides a belongingness through shared experiences. People also get a sense of proficiency and accomplishment from excelling in what they do. This can lead to positive psychological effects, especially when feeling vigorous (Shirom, 2003). On top of that it is often a big part of people's social life. It is where people socialize the most during the day, and our colleagues sometimes become our close friends. People's occupation can contribute to an increased well-being when it fulfills the needs and expectations that, but it can also be a source of frustration and despair, especially when this manifests as burnout.

Data show that only about fifteen percent of people are actively engaged at work (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). This is an eerie statistic because people who are discontent, disengaged, overwhelmed, or otherwise dissatisfied with their occupational situation have a higher chance of experiencing burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). So, what is the answer on how to prevent burnout and scaffold the positive aspects that work-life can have? One suggestion is that work engagement is the antidote to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2001). For one, when people are engaged in their work, they are less likely to experience burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014).

Research suggest that a combination of person-directed and organization-directed interventions are most effective in reducing burnout (Awa et al., 2010). It is highly context dependent, and the findings of this research suggest that a spillover from the private life into work can have a significant role in the development of burnout, this is relevant when designing intervention programs.

Preventing burnout in the workforce will have huge positive repercussions. To do so one need to understand the underlying causes and have an understanding of what individuals in work situations with high levels of stress need to mitigate the effects. Through the interviews in this paper, it was discovered that people often resort to talking about their symptoms when it is already quite severe or that they waited until there were no alternative but to tell their bosses or their doctors that they were ill because they physically or mentally unable to continue working. Higher levels of emotional exhaustion increase the likelihood of seeking professional, while depersonalization is a weaker catalyst for help-seeking behavior (Dyrbye et al., 2015). Interestingly, in all the interviews I did for this paper, none of the participants spoke about having depersonalization symptoms. Individuals who are depersonalized likely suffer more in silence.

In summary, what was important for the participants was to be recognized as being ill when they voiced their concern about symptoms of burnout. It can be difficult to identify symptoms of burnout, and thus more awareness of such symptoms could be key to work preventatively. In the final section of the discussion, I will therefore discuss how contextualizing burnout can be a way of showing being more sensitive to the individual experiences that ultimately decide whether an individual experience burnout or not.

5.7 Contextualizing burnout

The development of burnout went from being experimental and exploratory to later become very empirical and quantitative. Doing phenomenological studies on burnout helps to contextualize burnout and delve deeper into the underlying causes. The phenomenological hermeneutic method applied in this paper emphasize the importance of obtaining knowledge of the essential meaning of lived experience, "To be able to understand and, if necessary, to improve our own practice, we have to start with our lived experience" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Through the expression of our lived experiences, we can become aware of its meaning and this awareness can lead to improvements in our practices. Additionally, if organizational changes are implemented to improve the situation at the workplace it can end up being worthless unless we reflect on our experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). One of the participants spoke about this need:

> *I think there needs to be more reflection, and people need to say how they feel. And how it affects them. Not just at the system level. I believe that more needs to be solved in groups in the work than just arranging the areas that no one is working on. I don't know how to explain it, but more work needs to be done with the staff.* (Bente)

Handing out surveys, mapping to what extent employees is affected by burnout may not be sufficient to overcome it. This participant wanted more work done with the staff, to understand how the work affect them, and reflect upon it. As mentioned earlier, quantitative research may be well suited to get an overview of the situation, but qualitative research is better at getting insight.

Studying the lived experience of those who are affected by burnout enable us to reflect on these experiences. We are a part of the solution, but "[t]he meaning we need to reflect on is a meaning we take part in" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 148). Burnout manifests itself in many ways, through conflict, lack of support, work overload and so on. Through reflection of the lived meaning, it is possible to become more aware of the practices that we are a part of and change them for the better (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

6. Conclusion

The project of this paper has been to explore the lived experiences of those who are affected by burnout and make meaning of their experience to answer the problem statement: *What is the subjective experience of burnout among working individuals, and what might help reduce its prevalence?* I set out to explore and make sense of the participants experiences, examine burnouts prevalence, what it had been like to seek help, and how it affected thinking, behavior, and health – and I have given the phenomenon a voice through the participants narratives. In this chapter I will unravel how the problem statement has been answered, reflect on the process, bring up limitations and point out implications for future research.

6.1 Reflections on the study's contribution of knowledge

By analyzing and discussing the participants experiences, this paper identifies several themes, including the lack of clarity around the concept of burnout, resistance, and stigma in seeking help for burnout at work, individual and systemic factors contributing to burnout. This is the basis of the conclusion of this paper.

The participants expressed a lack of clarity around the concept of burnout, as it carries negative connotations, and it was often stigmatized. This lack of clarity and stigma may contribute to the individuals becoming hesitant to identify with burnout, seek support or acknowledge their symptoms before they become more acute, as has been indicated in this paper.

The three factors that were identified as contributing to the participants burnout; role ambiguity, the balance between work and private life, and the work culture are all areas that created stress. Creating a supportive and open environment where employees can share their experiences and seek help appear to be one way to implement preventative measures.

The findings indicate that people experiencing burnout are being marginalized, resulting in individuals not receiving necessary attention, resources, and support to overcome it. It may also contribute to that individuals seek alternative explanations for their symptoms, avoiding encounters at the workplace, and experiencing a sense of being undervalued or unappreciated.

The recognition of burnout as an occupational phenomenon and emphasizing prevention instead of focusing solely on treatment could be another way to reduce its prevalence. Employers and policymakers have a responsibility to improve work environments and address chronic work stress.

Overall, this paper's contribution lies in providing insights into the subjective experiences of burnout and its implications. It calls for a clearer understanding and recognition of burnout, addresses conceptual issues, highlights the consequences of marginalization, and discusses factors contributing to burnout. By increasing awareness and understanding, the paper aims to inform individuals, counsellors, workplaces, and policymakers on how to effectively deal with burnout and create healthier work environments.

6.2 Limitations

I will now discuss some of the limitations of the study. First, the study is limited when it comes to generalizability. I have chosen a qualitative and phenomenological approach, which is focused on exploring individual experiences and perspectives which means the findings may not be representative of a larger population. The focus on subjective experiences and perspectives could also lead to potential biases and inaccuracies of the phenomenon and does not necessarily reflect the objective reality of the phenomenon. However, as stated throughout the paper, this has not been the aim of the paper. It is meant to reflect the subjective experiences of the five participants.

Due to the difficulties of recruiting enough participants, the selection was not all employed at the same workplace and so the context of the findings varied which entails that the findings represent a broader range of experiences, rather than focusing on one specific field of workers. Additionally, the participants were recruited mostly through my network, which means the participants may have been influenced by social desirability bias in the interviews as most of the participants had some connection with me beforehand.

I did not employ MBI or other measuring instruments to confirm that the participants were affected by burnout. I based the recruitment fully on the participants own identification with having been burned out, employing MBI or other measuring instruments retrospectively could have been an option, but I do not believe this would have added anything overly valuable to the paper.

My role as a researcher may have influenced the research, specifically the process of data collection and the analysis of the material. I have been very involved in gathering data as I was responsible for all the interviews, afterwards I immersed myself in the material to understand it better, the analysis process is relatively subjective and employing this method could have led to some research bias.

6.3 Future research

I have tried to grasp the vagueness of burnout by going directly to the richest source of information, the lived experience. Through the interviews with the participants, I discovered that there were some reluctances to identify with burnout, the participants who voiced the most concern around what burnout really means were deterred by the suggestiveness of burnout as an ultimate defeat. This implies that an effort to inform the stakeholders that burnout is a common workplace phenomenon and to establish support systems are important. One way in which future research could investigate this could be to see how sensitizing leaders to recognize employees early warning signs of burnout (Pischel et al., 2022). Having leaders and managers who can pick up on signs of burnout could potentially have preventative value.

It would have been interesting to do a longitudinal study in an organization where both the employers and the employees were taught awareness of burnout in an attempt to demarginalize it and study how this affected the prevalence of burnout over time.

6.4 Closing comments

While this study has its limitations, its contribution to the literature on burnout highlight the need for more clarity and a greater consensus on the definition of burnout. By taking a step back and refocusing on what the essence of burnout is, I hope this study can inspire a more pragmatic approach to understanding burnout. By bringing awareness to and recognizing burnout as an occupational problem it is my hope that this research and future research on burnout can give employers and policymakers more unified and applicable tools to prevent and reduce burnout. I am grateful that I got the opportunity to talk to so many interesting people through my research, I am humbled to have gotten a chance to glimpse into a difficult period in their lives, it has given me an invaluable perspective.

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Appendix A - Sikt Approval of research.

Sikt

Meldeskjema / Utbrenthet i arbeidslivet / Vurdering

Vurdering av behandling av personopplysninger

Referansenummer	Vurderingstype	Dato
200916	Standard	26.01.2023

Prosjekttittel
Utbrenthet i arbeidslivet

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon
Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet / Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap (SU) / Institutt for pedagogikk og livslang læring

Prosjektansvarlig
Jonathan Reams

Student
Jo Vevstad Eidsvold

Prosjektperiode
01.01.2023 - 01.01.2024

Kategorier personopplysninger
Alminnelige
Særlige

Lovlig grunnlag
Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)
Uttrykkelig samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene er lovlig så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det lovlige grunnlaget gjelder til 01.01.2024.

Meldeskjema

Kommentar
OM VURDERINGEN
Sikt har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.

KOMMENTARER OG TILPASNINGER TIL INFORMASJONSSKRIV
Vi ser at du har oppgitt 1.1.2024 som dato for anonymisering av data. Men i informasjonsskrivet oppgir du 1. juni. Vi anbefaler at du endrer dato i informasjonsskrivet til 1.1.2024 dersom det er slik at du har behov for å beholde data med personopplysninger frem til denne datoen.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER
Vi har vurdert at du har lovlig grunnlag til å behandle personopplysningene, men husk at det er institusjonen du er ansatt/student ved som avgjør hvilke databehandlere du kan bruke og hvordan du må lagre og sikre data i ditt prosjekt. Husk å bruke leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med (f.eks. ved skylagring, nettspørreskjema, videosamtale el.)

Vi legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Se våre nettsider om hvilke endringer du må melde: https://sikt.no/melde-endringar-i-meldeskjema

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
Vi vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix B - Interview guide.

Intervjuguide - Utbrenthet

- Kan du si noe om din personlige bakgrunn?

Alder, sivilstatus, osv.

- Yrke, oppgaver, ansvar

- Hva synes du om utrykket utbrenthet?

Identifiserer du deg som utbrent?

- Kan du fortelle litt om din tidligere erfaring med utbrenthet?

Har du hatt erfaring med utbrenthet fra tidligere?
Har du opplevd det flere ganger?

- Vil du fortelle litt om situasjon når du ble utbrent

Fortell litt om situasjonen rundt arbeidet du stod i.
Fortell litt om hvordan livssituasjonen din opplevdes når du kjente at du var i ferd/var utbrent.

- Vil du fortelle litt om symptomer som du selv og/eller omgivelsene merket

Merket du eller noen på arbeidsplassen din fysiske symptomer?
Merket du eller noen på arbeidsplassen din endringer i din væremåte?

- Kan du beskrive ditt forløp?

Fortell gjerne hvordan utviklingen gikk for deg, hvordan det var å gå gjennom prosessen.

- Hva ble du mest stresset av?

Arbeidsmengden / tidspress?
Sjefer?
Kollegaer?
Annet?

- Hvordan ble du møtt om/da du sa ifra?

Hva var reaksjonen til de du sa ifra til?
Hva gjorde det med deg å si ifra?
Hvordan føltes det å holde tilbake om det du opplevde?

- Husker du hva du gjorde du for å håndtere/bedre situasjonen?

Hva var hjelpsomt/ikke hjelpsomt.

- I hvilken grad vil du si at du kom du deg gjennom utbrentheten?

Kjenner du fortsatt symptomer?
Er du mer bevisst hvordan du blir påvirket av arbeid?

- Hvordan vil du beskrive tilstanden utbrenthet?

Helt fritt, med dine egne ord, beskriv hva utbrenthet betyr for deg (hvordan det føles, hva du tenkte underveis)

- Hvordan fungerer du i arbeid i dag?

(Hvordan) Er du preget av erfaringene dine?

- Noe annet du ønsker å ta opp?

Appendix C – Letter of consent.

Informasjonsskriv - Masterprosjekt om utbrenthet

Hei,

jeg heter Jo og er masterstudent i rådgivningsvitenskap ved NTNU (institutt for pedagogikk og livslang læring). Jeg er i ferd med å skrive min avsluttende masteroppgave, hvor jeg vil utforske *utbrenthet*. Jeg kjenner til flere som har opplevd å «gå på en smell», og skal selv snart ut i arbeidslivet selv – dette er et tema jeg ønsker å forstå mer av.

For å finne ut av mer om dette, ønsker jeg å intervjue personer som vil prate med meg om tematikken. Oppgaven jeg skriver vil handle om hvordan man opplever utbrenthet og hvordan man blir møtt av omgivelsene sine med slike utfordringer.
Jeg ønsker altså å komme i kontakt med personer som har andre erfaringer med utbrenthet (i forskjellig grad).

Hvorfor utbrenthet?
Grunnen til at jeg ønsker å undersøke utbrenthet i min masteroppgave er at det er et utbredt fenomen i arbeidslivet som fører til en rekke utfordringer for både arbeidsgiver og arbeidstaker. Ifølge en undersøkelse av Gallup gjort i 2017 er hele 85% av arbeidere ikke engasjerte på jobb, eller de er aktivt uengasjerte, som er et symptom på utbrenthet. Hvem som helst kan oppleve det, og hvert forløp er forskjellig. Det er en stor utfordring i arbeidslivet, og er noe samfunnet er tjent med å få en større forståelse av.

Formål
Formålet med prosjektet er å undersøke hvordan personer opplever utbrenthet, og bidra til en økt bevissthet rundt fenomenet slik at man kan forebygge og oppdage det tidlig. Blant annet er målet å få et større innblikk i hva som forårsaker utbrenthet og hvordan man blir møtt med slike utfordringer på arbeidsplassen og andre deler av livet. Hvilke utfordringer er det som er forbundet med utbrenthet, og hvilke løsninger finnes for å motvirke det.

Hva innebærer det å delta?
Om man velger å delta i prosjektet innebærer det å bli intervjuet ved én anledning. Det vil ta ca. 1 til 1.5 time. Under intervjuet vil deltakerne bli stilt spørsmål om sine opplevelser, erfaringer og tanker om utbrenthet (temalisten som vil bli brukt under intervjuet kan bli sendt til deltakerne på forhånd om det ønskes).
Opplysningene fra intervjuet vil tas opp med en lydopptager og transkriberes, og oppbevares på to ulike digitale enheter. Intervjuet kan gjennomføres enten fysisk og digitalt avhengig av deltakeres lokasjon.
Det er helt frivillig å delta. De som velger å delta kan når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn, da vil alle personopplysninger bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deltakerne hvis de ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke seg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan oppbevarer vi og bruker opplysninger fra intervjuene?
Jeg vil bare bruke opplysningene om deltakerne til formålene jeg har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Jeg behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Det er kun ansvarlig student, Jo Eidsvold, og veileder, Jonathan Reams, som har tilgang til opplysningene. Navn og kontaktopplysningene til deltakerne vil erstattes med koder som lagres på adskilte enheter. Deltakerne vil bli anonymisert, slik at de ikke kan gjenkjennes i publikasjonen. Prosjektet er godkjent av Sikt - Kunnskapssektorens tjenesteleverandørs personverntjenester.
Ved prosjektets avslutning (01.01.2024) vil datamaterialet fra intervjuet slettes.

Hvis du ønsker å delta, har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

NTNU ved Jonathan Reams: jonathan.reams@ntnu.no eller Jo Eidsvold: Mail: Jove@ntnu.no eller tlf: [redacted]
Vårt personvernombud: Thomas Helgesen ved NTNU på epost: Thomas.helgesen@ntnu.no

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til vurderingen av prosjektet som er gjort av Sikts personverntjenester ta kontakt på:

- Epost: personverntjenester@sikt.no, eller telefon: 53 21 15 00.

Med vennlig hilsen

Jonathan Reams (Veileder)	Jo Eidsvold (Masterstudent)

Samtykkeerklæring

NTNU

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology