

Making sense of burnout: A reflexive thematic analysis of how teachers in England discuss and encounter the term burnout.

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Our study was approved by the University of East London's School of Psychology Ethics Committee (approval no. 2189520-0422). All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrolment in the study.

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Abstract

Despite extensive research looking at the phenomenon of burnout, little is known about how individuals working in traditionally high-burnout occupations understand the term. Interviews were conducted with six teachers working in state schools in England centring on how the term burnout was understood and how it was used or encountered. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed from a critical realist perspective to analyse the data generated. All participants described burnout as a stress related condition, yet for some participants the point at which stress became burnout was unclear leading to an understanding that burnout was the point at which one was unable to work. Many participants highlighted an individualistic understanding of burnout, perceiving it as representing an individual deficit rather than an organisational failing. This was often reinforced by where the term was encountered (at work or in the media), and was linked to the stigma many participants associated with burnout. This paper concludes that individualistic framings of burnout obscure its organisational determinants while reinforcing notions that mental well-being is something which should be personally – and privately – managed by individuals.

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Introduction

Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic occupational stress historically associated with human service workers and educators (Schaufeli et al., 1993). Burnout was a term first used colloquially by some professionals in the 1960s to describe feelings of emotional exhaustion and apathy in relation to their work (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). While the concept was initially dismissed as pseudoscience by researchers because of its origins as a colloquial term (Schaufeli, 2017), burnout has since developed into a mainstream topic of psychology and health research. However, despite the growth of work examining the concept of burnout, little attempt has been made to understand how the term is understood by those working in traditionally high-burnout occupations.

Maslach (2006) describes burnout as a long-term process caused by chronic exposure to occupational stress. Other researchers suggest that burnout stems from 'job strain', when the demands of a job exceed the job resources available to a worker (Demerouti et al., 2001). Despite broad agreement that burnout is a stress-related occupational condition more precise definitions differ. One of the most frequently used describes burnout as a multi-dimensional syndrome, comprising of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced self-efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, others such as Demerouti et al. (2001) do not propose self-efficacy as a separate dimension in their own definitions. It has been claimed that a lack of consensus among researchers has restricted research whilst hindering its adoption within medical nomenclature (Canu et al., 2021). Some researchers suggest that because of the persistent definitional and measurement problems associated with burnout, researchers should instead focus on other concepts such as occupational depression (Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2021) - yet others remain hopeful that burnout's conceptual issues will ultimately be overcome (Nadon et al., 2022).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach et al., 1986) is the most popular method of measuring burnout (Doulougeri et al., 2016) and uses separate scales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and self-efficacy to measure burnout. However, how these measures are combined into a unidimensional measure differs among researchers (Brenninkmeijer & VanYperen, 2003), with some rejecting the notion that a satisfactory unidimensional measure is possible (Enzmann et al., 1998). There is also disagreement over the thresholds which researchers use to ascribe either high or low-burnout scores - an issue starkly highlighted in Rotenstein et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis of physician burnout research, which showed burnout prevalence ranging from 0% to 80.5% across the studies examined. This lack of clarity over what constitutes burnout among researchers may lead to confusion among the public, something likely further exacerbated by media reporting which frequently presents burnout as a unidimensional and bifurcated construct either present or absent in individuals (Malesic, 2022).

Many researchers describe burnout as a social phenomenon (Brummelhuis et al., 2011; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Schaufeli, 2017) with Maslach and Leiter (2008) attributing it to specific 'economic trends, technology, and management philosophy' (p. 2) of the 20th century. However, Maslach and Leiter (2021) have recently voiced concerns that burnout has been increasingly framed as an individual problem (Maslach & Leiter, 2021), mirroring earlier arguments made by Starrin et al. (1990) who suggested that measuring burnout at an individual level would inevitably lead the concept to be understood through the individual. Other researchers have claimed that this individualistic concept of burnout simultaneously mirrors broader neoliberal discourses around the autonomous individual whilst obscuring organisational and social determinants (Mueller & Morley, 2020). Attempts to frame burnout within wider medical discourses may further reinforce notions that burnout is a problem of

the individual (Neilson, 2020). However, the lack of empirical research examining how burnout is understood by individuals hinders debates on such issues.

Teaching has been identified as a high-burnout occupation in many countries (Schaufeli, 2017). Emotional labour tends to be a key component of the job, with teachers reporting higher levels of emotional labour tending to report higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Kinman et al., 2011). Teachers also tend to be idealistic, entering the profession because of altruistic, child-oriented motivations (Barmby, 2006). These motivations are an important reason why individuals in helping professions are willing to do additional, unpaid hours (Neilson, 2020). In the UK teaching has consistently been identified as a high stress occupation (Johnson et al., 2005; Health and Safety Executive, 2022), with a recent report by the schools' inspectorate in England describing staff well-being as 'worryingly low' (Ofsted, 2019, p. 16). A recent survey on teacher well-being in the UK found 28% of respondents felt - or had others suggest to them - that the mental health symptoms they were experiencing were signs of burnout (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2022), itself an increase from the 22% of those who responded to the same question in the previous year's survey (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). This suggests that burnout is a term increasingly being used by school teachers in the UK to describe and make sense of their mental well-being, suggesting a need to examine how teachers understand the term.

How burnout has been understood by those working in high-burnout occupations has been relatively neglected. This has important practical implications for how burnout research is disseminated and understood by the wider public, and for its utility in giving meaning and explanation to individuals' lived experiences. Furthermore, it may help to bridge the 'striking gap' Heinemann et al. (2017) described as existing between burnout's ambiguous research results and its use in public discourse. This gap in the literature may reflect the limitations of the quantitative methods predominantly employed in burnout research (Mäkikangas &

Kinnunen, 2015), with such methods tending to be less suited for exploring how individuals engage with and make sense of the world. Additionally, it has been suggested that a prevailing biomedical understanding of burnout fails to capture the lived experience of individuals experiencing burnout (Engebresten & Bjorbækmo, 2020). Some qualitative research has placed greater focus on understanding burnout through lived experiences such as Eriksson et al. (2008) who interviewed individuals in Sweden, their analysis describing the process leading to being signed off work as ‘the burnout stairs’, a gradual deterioration of individuals mental well-being characterised by feelings of individual failure and shame. A similar ‘burnout spiral’ – linked to high levels of emotional labour and unsupportive working environments - was described in Acheson et al.’s (2016) study examining burnout among teachers in the USA.

Results from a recent qualitative questionnaire of individuals in Australia who self-reported experiencing burnout suggests that burnout comprises a much broader set of symptoms than those currently accepted as its core features (Tavella & Parker, 2020), alluding to a divergence between how burnout is conceptualised in research and its colloquial usage. Further research is warranted to explore how teachers understand and make sense of the health categories used to describe their mental well-being. This is particularly pertinent in the UK with its deterioration of teachers’ mental well-being, and burnout appearing to be increasingly used to describe teachers’ lived experiences. Therefore, this study sought to explore the question: *how do teachers in England make sense of and understand the term burnout?*

Methodology

This research sought to explore how individuals made sense of the term burnout while examining the frames through which it was discussed. Semi-structured interviews were

chosen as they enable the collection of rich data relating to how participants make sense of phenomena, whilst additionally enabling a space whereby participants may disclose important - yet often hidden - insights regarding certain phenomena (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This research was also undertaken from a Critical Realist (CR) perspective, the core premises of which are ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgemental rationalism (Bhaskar, 1975; Willis, 2022). Because of this position, a theoretically flexible method of analysis was chosen in the form of Braun and Clarke's (2021a) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Additionally, RTA is firmly grounded within a qualitative research paradigm (Campbell et al., 2021) and has been shown as a useful tool for health researchers exploring individual's views and lived experiences (e.g. Mantzalas et al., 2022; Soucie et al., 2020).

Participants

Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. A participant recruitment letter summarising the aims and process of the research was distributed via email to friends and family members of the lead researcher, with individuals invited to forward the letter to teachers they knew who may be interested in participating. The letter invited potential participants to email the lead researcher if they wished to participate or ask any questions about the research. 3 participants were recruited directly by the lead researcher with a further 3 participants recruited via the snowball process. Individuals were eligible to participate if they currently worked as a class teacher at a state funded, mainstream primary or secondary school in England. This criterion reflected the different roles and responsibilities between classroom teachers and managers, the different experiences of teachers working in the private and state sector in England (Brady & Wilson, 2022), and the differing education systems of the different devolved nations in the UK (Hulme & Menter, 2011). Half the participants had been teaching for less than 5 years and were between 27-29 years old. The remaining teachers were aged between 57-61 and had all been teaching for at least 15 years. All participants at

the time worked in cities, with half working in London and the remaining working in cities in the south of England or in the Midlands. One participant worked at an academy while another worked as a supply teacher. The remaining participants worked at local authority-maintained schools.

Procedure

Prior to interviews participants were provided with the definition of burnout from the World Health Organisation's (WHO) 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (World Health Organisation, 2019), with this definition being used as a point of conversation during interviews. All interviews started with the same warm-up question ('can you tell me a little bit about the school you work at?') and an interview guide containing 11 questions was used. The order of questions was not strictly adhered to, enabling interviews to feel more conversational and for responses to be explored in greater depth. Questions centred around participants' understanding of the term burnout ('How would you describe what burnout is?'; 'Do you think the term burnout carries with it positive, negative, or neutral connotations?'), their views on the WHO definition of burnout, and whether they thought the term was useful in relation to their profession. Interviews were conducted either online or at participant's own homes and lasted between 36 minutes and 62 minutes ($M = 52$ minutes). Interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher, with any identifying details such as names removed. Once transcribed interview recordings were deleted, with all data subsequently stored on an encrypted external storage device.

CR research prioritises methodological, epistemic, ontological, practical, and ethical reflexivity (Rutzou, 2016) while Braun and Clarke (2021b) explicitly state both researcher and participant subjectivity should be embraced as part of the analytical process of RTA. Thus, as researchers, we acknowledge our own experiences and viewpoints have shaped our

analysis of the data, the first author's experiences of working in primary schools in England in particular shaping their subjectivities. However, this experience was viewed as a point of strength of the study as it helped to mitigate the insider/outsider dynamic which can influence participant responses (however this divide should not be oversimplified, see Gair, 2012). A research diary was kept throughout the research process enabling the researchers own subjectivities to be acknowledged and reflected upon throughout. Furthermore, because interviews could have involved discussing sensitive topics or instances of mental distress, additional measures were put in place to safeguard participants' well-being. This included providing a definition of burnout in advance of the interviews rather than risk participants identifying themselves as having experienced something similar to the definition during interviews. Contact information for an organisation which gave free support to teachers experiencing mental distress was provided to participants, while participants were given a copy of the consent form at least a week before interviews allowing participants time to ask questions about the research. Ethical approval was gained from the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

The first step of analysis involved familiarisation with the data and noting down initial thoughts and ideas. NVivo 12 was then used to code transcripts inductively, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) suggestion that coding should focus on researcher's reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytical process. Codes were both semantic, highlighting explicit meanings of the data (e.g. 'participant encounters burnout being used in the media') and latent, noting hidden or underlying meanings and assumptions (e.g. 'burnout perceived as representing an individual's own inadequacies in their job'). Multiple rounds of coding were conducted, enabling codes to be refined and reflected upon. This enabled the generation of initial themes which reflected analytical insights across the data. Initial themes largely focused on latent codes for analytic points, however semantic codes also had explanatory

power as they represented the observable or empirical domain through which CR posits the actual and real domains can be understood via abductive and retroductive reasoning (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). From these initial themes, two themes were generated which sought to present an analytical narrative of the most pertinent points of analysis in regard to the research question. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022, p. 20) recommendation for RTA, analytic observations were contextualised in relation to existing theory and research in the reporting of themes. Participant extracts were included to show transparency with regards to the insights and points made by the researchers.

Analysis

The first theme, '*Confusion and clarity: the role of individual experience*', describes how participants discussed and understood burnout. Divided into two sub-themes, the first details the confusion some participants expressed while attempting to conceptually delineate burnout from stress, while the second reflects how participants who had experienced burnout discussed it in terms of an internal process intimately linked to working conditions. The second theme, '*Individualising burnout*', examines how the contexts in which the term burnout was encountered often constructed it as a private problem for the individual. The theme's first sub-theme highlights how the term could be encountered in ways which presupposed individualistic interpretations of the concept. The second sub-theme demonstrates how burnout was felt to be misused and misunderstood, carrying stigma as it was felt to reflect an individual's inability to do their job rather than wider organisational and social failings.

Confusion and clarity: the role of individual experience

Where does stress end and burnout begin?

All participants discussed burnout as being a reaction to specific circumstances at work whilst viewing it as a long-term, cumulative process. However, some participants expressed uncertainty around how burnout differed from experiencing occupational stress, and described burnout as representing the point at which an individual was unable to work:

But I think the idea that we have in our head, or the idea that I had in my head, not to generalise would be, burnout is like you yeah, like I said before, you actually can't go on you physically can't get out of bed almost.

when is work related stress actually burnout, is that when you like runaway, kicking and screaming and you just can't face coming back into the classroom, or not you're just not turning up. It's, I don't know it's almost like where does it, where, at what point does it become burnout, you know, is it when you can't actually go to work anymore. Or is it when you're almost at the point where you can't go to work anymore?

Whilst burnout is often understood as a descriptor of an individual's internal experiences and feelings such as exhaustion, cynicism and perceived self-efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), these participants suggested burnout to be possibly a more visible, external manifestation, one demarked by the ability to physically be present at work. Thus, these participants conceptualised burnout as a bifurcated construct. This contrasts with its conceptualisation in research, where it is positioned as something existing on a spectrum, yet mirrors the confusion among researchers with regards to how burnout scores are presented and how quantitative distinctions are made when attempting to differentiate low or high-burnout scores when measured (Brenninkmeijer & VanYperen, 2003; Rotenstein et al., 2018). For participants in this study, burnout was a difficult concept to delineate from stress, with this uncertainty leading participants to understand it as being related to an individual's ability to

be physically working. These participants also suggested that the term burnout itself implied a finality, influencing how they made sense of the construct:

I'm thinking about, particularly some of the people that I work with, and I think they would probably feel or maybe they're burning out [laughs], they're in the process of, but maybe it's only, dunno. Burnout just to me sounds like a very final thing, that's the point where they're not coming into work.

what I get from the metaphor to be burnt out, and that's maybe part of why I felt it was such an extreme case of, umm, yeah workplace stress or negativity, the, of the feeling of, like put down by your workplace. Burnt out makes it sound really extreme, like you can't even face, that for me I thought it was, so you can't face going into the doors the next day.

This mirrors Lenner-Axelsson's (1986, cited in Starrin et al., 1990) assertion that there is an incongruence between an association of the term 'burnout' with an irreversible state and how burnout is discussed in the literature. This disconnect could be the result of what linguists refer to as 'nominalisation' – turning a process into an entity through the use of nouns instead of verbs – common in academic and scientific writing (e.g., Biber & Gray, 2021; Billig, 2013; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). In other words, by using the noun 'burnout', the academic literature implies an end state rather than a cumulative process. Other researchers have also questioned whether the metaphor reflects what is being described and measured in burnout research (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). The participants suggest it implies an extreme state and finality, and thus a descriptor for when an individual lacks any energy or willpower to go to work. This link to energy mirrors Fontes' (2020) suggestion that the individual as an 'energy system' is the core metaphor underpinning burnout, with individuals feeling they are lacking in energy being more prone to exhaustion and burnout. However the

participants above suggested burnout represented a total absence of energy, therefore potentially informing why burnout was felt to be intimately linked physical absence from the workplace.

Experiencing burnout as an internal process

Some participants described themselves as having previously experienced burnout or felt burnt out at points in their career. These participants tended to describe it as a cluster of internal feelings such as exhaustion or anxiety and part of a longer process, directly linked to adverse or stressful working conditions. One of these participants described feeling:

just exhausted, just completely at the end of my tether. I remember going into my head teacher crying and saying I'm just at capacity, I can't. And that's how it felt, I actually just felt full of just worry and stress.

This participant felt exhaustion was a central component of their experiences, fitting Maslach et al.'s (2001) assertion that exhaustion is the central quality of burnout and its most obvious manifestation. However, in contrast to making sense of burnout as being an absence of energy, it was reframed as being at full capacity and having nothing left to give, implying the participant felt she had insufficient resources to meet the demands of the job. They also highlighted feeling full of 'worry and stress', a symptom frequently cited by participants in Tavella and Parker's (2020) survey of individuals self-reporting burnout. The same participant went on to describe physical symptoms such as poor sleep as occurring concurrently, as well as a general feeling of 'being totally exhausted'. For other participants who discussed similar experiences, burnout was made sense of and interpreted in relation to their own work as teachers:

if the task that you're trying to do is perpetually giving you that sense, then that is the burnout that you, you will experience with that task, and on and I think until the task actually, the nature of the task changes, I think you'll always experience it if it's perpetually giving you that, that feeling.

This participant understood burnout as a long-term feeling, generated by insufficient resources to carry out some or all of their tasks. Their understanding also mirrored Epstein and Delgado's (2010) conceptualisation of the development of moral distress through a crescendo effect. In their model, when a worker continually carries out tasks which cause moral distress, a sense of futility is generated which, over time, leads to gradually rising levels of moral residue. The model's rising base level of moral residue means each task reminds workers of the powerlessness of their situation, compounding its effects and creating a crescendo effect. For the participant above, each task was compounding negative feelings towards the job, 'because then you start feeling like you're not capable of doing it'. The participant thus experienced a crescendo effect, but for burnout rather than moral residue.

A similar cumulative effect was described by another participant, yet linked to an inability to meet their own expectations and the perceived expectations of others. They described how an inability to meet their expectations regarding their own workload generated anxiety, leading them to 'try[ing] to catch up [on work] and then you're not sleeping properly'. This points to how negative feelings associated with burnout can be mutually reinforcing, with increased feelings of reduced self-efficacy generating anxiety, which consequently increases exhaustion as one works harder to meet job demands. Therefore, while some researchers describe reduced personal efficacy as a by-product of exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001) – and others have questioned whether the dimension in fact falls outside of the burnout construct (Reis et al., 2015) – participants in this current study demonstrated how reduced feelings of accomplishment can exacerbate feelings of exhaustion. This reflects similar findings from a

study of teachers in the USA which found levels of emotional exhaustion and perceived inefficacy mutually influencing each other and thus creating a downward spiral toward burnout (Acheson et al., 2016). Fundamentally, for participants in this study burnout was understood not only as a set of symptoms, but the wider process itself - intimately linked to their working environment – within which their symptoms were embedded.

Overall, how participants made sense of burnout depended to an extent on their own experiences and whether they identified as having experienced it. Some participants felt confused attempting to delineate burnout from stress, and tended to understand the concept through its associated metaphors. Consequently, because of associations with finality and a total lack of energy, burnout was conceptualised as the point at which one could not work. Participants who identified as having previously experienced burnout or symptoms of burnout were clearer and more sure in how they described burnout, tending to understand it as a descriptor of a range of both mental and physical health symptoms, such as exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and sleeplessness. Moreover, burnout was also made sense of as a cumulative process which led to a deterioration of an individual's mental well-being.

Individualising burnout

You're on your own: burnout as a private problem

Some participants said that they could not recall the term burnout being used in the workplace. One participant suggested that burnout was not used in their workplace because their managers preferred to focus on more positive aspects of well-being:

I think management focus on it [well-being] in a positive way they, they, we have a lot of staff meetings about well-being, and work life balance and support, but we don't really have a lot of advice on what to do when you're not in that kind of golden place of well-being

This participant suggested that her school's policy on staff well-being was focused on positive aspects, such as improving staff members work life balance, rather than negative aspects of well-being, such as stress and burnout. This mirrors a growing trend for organisations to use insights from positive psychology to develop interventions at work to improve staff well-being (Donaldson et al., 2019), with a focus on cultivating an individual's strengths and engendering support between colleagues. Similarly, in burnout literature there has been a move towards focusing on building job engagement and positive attitudes toward work (Rupert et al., 2015). However, the same participant also suggested focusing on positive aspects of well-being enabled management to discuss staff mental well-being 'without acknowledging that some people are further along that path [to burnout]'. Another participant also suggested that management avoided wider discussions of negative mental health related to work and the term burnout because doing so would be an admission that it was an issue:

I think that's how management is they, they know that people are burnt out, they know they're tired, but if they acknowledged it, they would have to do something, because then that person will leave, or they'd be on long-term sick. I don't know why they don't address it; I suppose because it costs money.

While highlighting that her school had staff dedicated to supporting well-being, the participant suggested they ultimately failed to address the actual issues which led to poor well-being and burnout, such as long hours, large class sizes, and few support staff. While criticising of the school's well-being policies as being ineffective ('I do feel it is tokenistic because the reality is, we do pretty much get left on our own to get on with it'), the participant's allusion to the financial constraints her school faced suggests that placing the responsibility of staff well-being upon individuals could be viewed as a cost effective measure by management. This could reflect the increasing financial constraints schools have

faced since 2010, with reduced spending per pupil coupled with increased costs (Sibieta, 2022). The perception that they were left alone in managing her well-being demonstrates how individualising burnout and mental well-being reinforces broader neoliberal discourses of the individual, where individuals are responsible for not just their actions but the management of their thoughts and feelings (Mueller & Morley, 2020). For the participant quoted above, discussing burnout and other work-related mental health concerns were not what managers ‘want[ed] to hear, they just want[ed] you to be there’, further reinforcing the notion that issues such as burnout were private, individual problems, and not the priority of management.

One participant described how she encountered the term being used and discussed in specialist teacher magazines in similarly individualistic terms:

You hear it lots in media, lots of magazines that you read, teacher magazines and things like that. They talk about it, and they acknowledge it and there’s usually lots about, erm, ways to organise your time to avoid it and things like that.

They went on to describe the Times Educational Supplement (TES) magazine’s information on how to manage and avoid burnout as ‘good in an ideal world, but the reality is you can only organise your time so much’. Therefore, it was suggested that the realities of teaching and the job’s demands limited an individual’s ability to actively prevent burnout, despite advice implying individuals could actively avoid it. Furthermore, this highlights how burnout can be encountered as something avoidable through individuals making the right choices, reifying it as a personal problem. An examination of recent burnout articles in TES supports this idea, with articles such as ‘teachers need to be active in avoiding burnout’ (Watts, 2021) and other contributors suggesting ‘to avoid teacher burnout, break up with your inner perfectionist, learn to say ‘no’ and mark less’ (Wilson, 2021), demonstrating how burnout can be framed in terms of personal responsibility. This reporting mirrors ways in which burnout

and mental illness are often communicated in media across other countries in Europe, with one study describing how the logics of individualism and consumerism intersect to confirm notions around individual autonomy and responsibility to make the right choices for their mental health (Van Beveren et al., 2020), reinforcing broader neoliberal narratives which ‘place the responsibility for securing satisfaction primarily on the individual, making it the consequence of personal choice’ (Houghton, 2019, p. 623).

Burnout as a source of shame

Some participants suggested burnout’s use in the media was lax or ambiguous, with one describing the term as being ‘just sort of bounced around in the media’. Other participants raised similar concerns:

I think people have a very superficial idea of what it means, from what they’ve seen on films or TV programs or whatever, of people saying, ‘oh I’m burnt out’, and it’s like something that you’ll get over quickly but from my perspective I think it’s something that’s far reaching, and it can trigger off lots of things from anxiety, depression, and so forth.

Another participant felt she often encountered the term being used as a synonym for tiredness. While this suggests the term is encountered in the media, participants felt when it was encountered in such contexts its seriousness was undermined. One participant opined that ‘when people truly feel like that [burnout], they probably don’t say it, they’re just experiencing it and these things are happening to them, and they would only say how they’re feeling if they really, really needed help’. Thus, in contrast to how some participants discussed encountering burnout being used flippantly in certain contexts, many felt admitting experiencing burnout to others was difficult, with some highlighting an element of shame and stigma around it:

people do feel a slight element of shame, I certainly do in terms of someone if I say to people I'm burnt out I actually think to myself, you know, can you justify being burned out [participant's name], and what do you mean by that. And can you explain to people how you've been feeling and, and do you feel embarrassed because you're saying that effectively I can't cope

The participant's suggestion that burnout could be perceived as a sign of failure by the individual or by others mirrors data from a previous study which identified shame as an important but often overlooked aspect of individuals experiences of burnout (Eriksson et al., 2008). Their suggestion that admitting to experiencing burnout may feel embarrassing reflects arguments made by Han (2015) that western society has moved toward an achievement culture whereby people are self-motivated due to a valorisation of hard working, high achieving individuals. Therefore, individual's failure or success is not determined by wider social forces but by their own individual will to succeed. If viewed within these frames, burnout could be interpreted as a sign one has given up or was not willing to work as hard as required – with the individual embarrassed because they were unable to meet social expectations.

While not every participant felt burnout carried stigma, those who did suggested it made it more difficult to discuss with others:

sometimes people who, like you say, who do truly feel like that [burnt out], they do keep it to themselves because they feel like, that means I'm a failure and I, I'm not doing my job properly.

If you're burnt out, and I suppose it's in any job if you're burnt out, then there's question, there could be questions of are you cut out for this, you know. And that if then someone asked the question whether they're in the right job and whether they

feel like people think they're able to do their job well enough, I think that's where that negative thing comes from.

These participants demonstrate that burnout, rather than being viewed as a normal reaction to abnormal demands as some researchers have suggested (Schaufeli, 2017), could be seen as the opposite – an inability to cope with normal job demands. While many authors are keen to stress organisational factors as the key causes of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Schaufeli, 2017) – and indeed all participants of this study highlighted organisational factors and job demands as the key cause of burnout – many felt burnout was often framed and interpreted by others as being a sign of individual weakness, supporting Mueller and Morley's (2020) claim that burnout is frequently constructed and interpreted as an individual deficit. Additionally, individuals who attempt to mask internal experiences of burnout through working harder may be difficult to identify because working hard is a culturally and socially valued behaviour (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007). A perception that burnout represents a sign of individual weakness has also been found among-teachers in France (Bianchi et al., 2015) and Sweden (Lindqvist et al., 2021), suggesting such perceptions are present beyond the sample of this present study. Such perceptions potentially hinder burnout's use – at least colloquially between teachers – as a description for mental distress and point to why burnout may be encountered in certain contexts over others. This may explain why few participants described using the term in the workplace and between colleagues, as in doing so may put them at risk of being perceived by others as unable to cope with the demands of the job, despite all participants affirming that burnout was the result of the job demands themselves.

Conclusion

This study used a novel approach to understanding burnout through in-depth interviews with individuals working in the traditionally high-burnout occupation of teaching. It generated insights into how individuals make sense of the term while also highlighting some of the surrounding discourses and contexts through which the term is encountered. Moreover, the adoption of a critical realist approach to research has enabled analysis beyond the text to how discourses may have been constructed as well as exploring underlying causation (see Willis, 2022).

A key finding of this study is how burnout is understood is informed by an individual's own experience – or lack thereof – of burnout. Individuals who described themselves as having previously experienced burnout or symptoms of burnout made sense of the term through a range of emotions and feelings such as anxiety, stress, or shame. By contrast, participants who did not describe themselves as having experienced burnout felt unsure of how to differentiate between burnout and occupational stress, and consequently felt it may mean the point at which one was no longer able to work. Such understandings were also informed by burnout's connotations with a total absence of energy and finality.

A second key finding centred on how burnout was often perceived to be framed via individualistic lenses. Some participants described their school well-being policies as constructing issues such as burnout as the responsibility of individual teachers, or avoiding discussing burnout altogether. Participants' described media depictions as being flippant, underplaying its seriousness, while one participant suggesting some media reporting constructed it as being the responsibility of individual teachers. Overall, this theme suggested that burnout was encountered within an individualistic framework which reflected broader neoliberal discourses on mental health. This tended to obscure other systemic or organisational issues, making the individual ultimately responsible for their own mental health. This was observed most acutely by the participants who described feelings of shame

or personal inadequacy associated with burnout, consequently making discussing burnout with others more difficult.

There are likely to be further causal factors behind how teachers make sense of burnout – and indeed other understandings of burnout - which were not identified because they were not apparent in the data. Additionally, the study's sample did not include teachers who could be described as 'mid-career' (i.e. teaching for between 5 – 15 years), a group whose insights on burnout may have differed from the teachers in the study who were mostly near the beginning or end of their teaching careers, particularly as these group may experience different or unique stressors outside of work (e.g. starting families) to the individuals in this study.

Different schools may take different approaches to burnout, possibly influencing how the term is understood and encountered by individuals particularly if they adopt more organisationally driven approaches to burnout. However, given the long-term decline of school budgets in England and the consequent deterioration of working conditions many teachers have experienced, individual approaches to managing staff well-being may take precedence if reducing job demands on teachers proves difficult. Additionally, while this study did show a difference in how burnout was understood depending on individuals' direct experience with burnout, this distinction may not be easily generalisable to other teachers (although see Smith, 2018), and further research is warranted to explore this divergence.

Nevertheless, this study's approach has demonstrated the utility of conducting small scale qualitative research on health categories such as burnout. The use of in-depth interviews having been demonstrated to be a useful medium for exploring both teachers views on burnout and the wider discourses and ecologies in which understandings are situated.

Moreover, this research has highlighted the extent to which teaching can impact an individual's well-being and mental health, and the emotional toll teaching can take.

Worryingly, the finding that some teachers perceived burnout as being viewed as a sign of

individual failure does not appear conducive to retaining teachers or creating nurturing working environments for teacher. Ultimately, a more organisationally driven approach to burnout and other forms of mental distress must be adopted by schools and policy makers to counteract the more individualistic framings of the construct which were identified in this study.

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