

The Bidirectional Effect between Parental Burnout and the Child's Internalized and/or Externalized Behaviors

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Abstract : Background information: Becoming a parent is said to be the happiest event one can ever experience in one's life. This popular (and almost absolute) truth—which no reasonable and decent human being would ever dare question on pain of being singled out as a bad parent—contrasts with the nuances that reality offers. Indeed, while many parents do thrive in their parenting role, some others falter and become progressively overwhelmed by their parenting role, ineluctably caught in a spiral of exhaustion. Parental burnout (henceforth PB) sets in when parental demands (stressors) exceed parental resources. While it is now generally acknowledged that PB affects the parent's behavior in terms of neglect and violence toward their offspring, little is known about the impact that the syndrome might have on the children's internalized (anxious and depressive symptoms, somatic complaints, etc.) and/or externalized (irritability, violence, aggressiveness, conduct disorder, oppositional disorder, etc.) behaviors. Furthermore, at the time of writing, to our best knowledge, no research has yet tested the reverse effect, namely, that of the child's internalized and/or externalized behaviors on the onset and/or maintenance of parental burnout symptoms. Goals and hypotheses: The present pioneering research proposes to fill an important gap in the existing literature related to PB by investigating the bidirectional effect between PB and the child's internalized and/or externalized behaviors. Relying on a cross-lagged longitudinal study with three waves of data collection (4 months apart), our study tests a transactional model with bidirectional and recursive relations between observed variables and at the three waves, as well as autoregressive paths and cross-sectional correlations. Methods: As we write this, wave-two data are being collected via Qualtrics, and we expect a final sample of about 600 participants composed of French-speaking (snowball sample) and English-speaking (Prolific sample) parents. Structural equation modeling is employed using Stata version 17. In order to retain as much statistical power as possible, we use all available data and therefore apply the maximum likelihood with a missing value (mlmv) as the method of estimation to compute the parameter estimates. To limit (in so far as possible) the shared method variance bias in the evaluation of the child's behavior, the study relies on a multi-informant evaluation approach. Expected results: We expect our three-wave longitudinal study to show that PB symptoms (measured at T1) raise the occurrence/intensity of the child's externalized and/or internalized behaviors (measured at T2 and T3). We further expect the child's occurrence/intensity of externalized and/or internalized behaviors (measured at T1) to augment the risk for PB (measured at T2 and T3). Conclusion: Should our hypotheses be confirmed, our results will make an important contribution to the understanding of both PB and children's behavioral issues, thereby opening interesting theoretical and clinical avenues.

Keywords : exhaustion, structural equation modeling, cross-lagged longitudinal study, violence and neglect, child-parent relationship

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