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PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT:
SOCIOCULTURAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES*

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ABSTRACT

Social psychological, organizational, and administrative orientations dominate the literature on the phenomenon of professional burnout. This paper argues that sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives offer additional insights into the issue. By the application of such perspectives we are compelled to examine how certain characteristics of social policies impact dysfunctionally on service providers as well as service recipients. Furthermore, the broader approach outlined here offers alternative intervention strategies for the alleviation or prevention of burnout than those commonly posed in previous literature.

INTRODUCTION

Interest in the manifestations, causes, and treatment of professional burnout in the human services appears to be accelerating (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976; Maslach and Pines, 1977; Larson et.al., 1978; Pines and Maslach, 1978; Maslach and Jackson, 1978; Maslach, 1979; Hall et.al., 1979; Maslach and Jackson, 1979; Hendrickson, 1979; Cherniss, 1980; Erlich and Zietz, 1980). Yet, none of these writings (with the exception of Cherniss, 1980) have demonstrated an understanding of how larger systems variables may operate to produce or exacerbate the phenomenon of professional burnout. This article argues that <u>sociocultural</u> and <u>sociopolitical</u> perspectives are applicable to the study of burnout, with attention being given to the following issues: How do society's beliefs and values, the nature of politics, and the characteristics of social policies which flow from political systems and cultural values contribute to the experience of burnout by service professionals? How might social policies be altered to prevent or alleviate burnout? If we can specify the less proximal causes of burnout, then it is possible to suggest intervention strategies which could prove more fruitful in conjunction with individual- or agency-specific strategies for alleviation or prevention of the burnout phenomenon.

What seems to be characteristic of the bulk of reports on burnout is an emphasis on either social psychological or organizational and administrative issues and remedies. Thus, the relevant questions pursued by investigators have focused on the following questions or some variation thereof: (1) How does the professional's personality or behaviors contribute to becoming burned out? What can the individual do to prevent or alleviate burnout? (2) What are the requirements of the work setting which contribute to employee burnout? How might work be reorganized to prevent or alleviate this syndrome?

The following analysis proposes the integration of sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives with the organizational and social psychological orientations abundant in the literature in order to develop a fuller under-standing of the burnout phenomenon. First, two hypothetical cases based on analytical writings and empirical research are used to illustrate in general the utility of an integrated analysis and in particular the utility of socio-cultural and sociopolitical perspectives. Next, attention is given to the implications of the cases for effective intervention and for improved research into the problem of professional burnout. The appendix to this article pro-vides for those interested the model of variable relationships on which the following analyses are based.

TWO SCENARIOS

This section describes two hypothetical situations in which burnout is manifest. The descriptions differ in one important way from typical illustra-tions of the burnout phenomenon throughout the scholarly and popular literature. This difference lies in our locating the ultimate sources of burnout not in the social psychology of the provider, not in the managerial framework of her/his job, and not in the shortcomings surrounding the client, but rather in the larger sociopolitical and sociocultural processes which filter down to the client-provider relationships. This analytical difference proves significant in evoking a fuller understanding of burnout and in deriving implications for effective intervention into and improved research on professional burnout.

Scenario #1: Provider Exhaustion
In this scenario, we see the dedicated service worker who invests long hours in client contact, despite a growing caseload, despite her or his gnawing feeling that the client's situation does not seem to improve, or despite the fact that if success is achieved with one client, another with very similar problems moves in to take the place of the former. Work is important to the service provider because she/he has a deep commitment to seeing social change occur and to improving the everyday lives of those with whom the provider works. But after several years on the job, during which time the worker has noticed little if any collective improvement despite her/his devoted efforts, a feeling of emotional exhaustion has replaced earlier idealism and enthusiasm. She/He has gradually become disillusioned and is considering changing to a job which is less demanding.

The provider is burned out from the role stresses of overload, frustra-tion, and conflict. Role overload is perceived to have occurred because the worker has a large number of role relationships with clients which exhaust the

worker's store of psychic exchange resources; these relationships are depleting because the client is unable to reciprocate at a level which would balance the exchange. (See Marks, 1977, for an analysis of role overload as an account.)

Role frustration may be defined as a feeling resulting from the inability of the worker to perform the provider role adequately due to limitations of resources in the social environment (Bates and Harvey, 1975:363). Thus, lack of adequate funds to meet needs and the existence of service systems which suffer from lack of comprehensiveness and lack of coordination can contribute to role frustration, and eventually burnout, on the part of the service worker.

Role conflict occurs because of inconsistent demands placed on the provider by others in the execution of the work role. For example, the client may at times require lengthy interaction with the provider while at the same time the provider's supervisor utilizes number of clients seen as a measure of work performance (e.g., Zimmerman, 1969). The supervisor realizes the worker's dilemma but has to maintain certain levels of service in order for the agency to continue receiving funds in the short run and in order to be part of the statistics which satisfy Congressional oversight committees in the long run. Nevertheless, the two demands are incompatible; attempts to satisfy both result in worker stress and eventual exhaustion, a symptom of burnout.

If the analysis were to stop here, suggested strategies for attempting to alleviate burnout might include educating the worker and the client regarding the limitations of what agencies can do, establishing an intra-agency support group to air one's stresses and to allow the worker to realize that her/his situation is not unique, and obtaining a mix of administration and service work so one does not have to engage continually in depleting relationships. Thus, the underlying sources of burnout are not addressed, although strategies for coping in a dysfunctional setting may be developed.

However, let us look further in the causal chain which eventually leads to the phenomenon of burnout. The above scenario posits a relationship between client characteristics, role overload, and burnout; between characteristics of the service system, role frustration, and burnout; and between job character-istics, role conflict, and burnout. We now need to ask such questions as: (1) What causes a continually imbalanced exchange and power relationship between providers and clients? (2) What causes service systems to be inadequately funded, fragmented, and uncoordinated? (3) What causes conflicting role demands by agencies and by clients? Although we do not intend here to attempt a defini-tive response to each of these questions, some suggestions will be offered which may serve to identify higher-level causes of burnout.

In response to the first question, it can be argued that a strong imperative of the service disciplines (McKnight, 1977), and of interest groups spawned by the service industry (e.g., Lowi, 1969; Estes, 1979) is to perpetuate the domi-nance of services and a service orientation. This orientation by definition equips service workers with superior exchange resources in a provider-client relationship. The services strategy operates in a political and cultural climate in which service recipients are defined as more or less deserving, thereby im-posing a negative status generalization (e.g., Dowd, 1979) and diminished value on any exchange resources possessed by those categories of consumers defined as less deserving. Thus, both cultural ideologies and political dynamics contribute

to social policies which reinforce a continually imbalanced exchange relationship between providers and clients, which in turn may lead to provider role overload and eventually to burnout.

Similarly, the source of inadequately funded, fragmented, and uncoordinated service systems can be located in certain attributes of politics. Inadequate funds result in part from legislation which is largely symbolic in nature but which adequately serves the political needs of the legislator in addressing constituent concerns (Edelman, 1977; Binstock, 1978). Fragmented and uncoordinated service systems result from politicians' efforts to satisfy the demands of competing interest groups and middlemen in the allocation of resources to address problems. Thus, legislation which serves the politician's needs may create structurally problematic and inadequately funded services which may lead to role frustration and ultimately to burnout for the service provider.

Finally, the needs of politicians to demonstrate visible results to their constituents in addressing social problems (Binstock and Levin, 1976) can lead to agency practices which result in goal displacement (Estes, 1973). Thus, in our example, if the politician is interested primarily in number of clients served by a program, an agency's funds may be tied to readily available client numbers rather than quality of client improvement. The service worker, then, will be caught in a conflict between agency needs and client needs. Such role conflict, if ongoing, can contribute to the experience of worker burnout. Here again, we see that political dynamics influences the nature of social policies; these policies in turn create job requirements for the service worker which lead to role conflict and possibly to burnout.

The ability to identify macrosociological sources of professional burnout is not limited to this single scenario. We shall present one other hypothetical situation to reinforce this point before exploring its implications.

Scenario #2: Administrator Apathy
In this vignette we see the services administrator who has experienced a continual decline in involvement in and motivation toward her/his work over the past two years. It is not clear to the administrator what the direction of her/his agency should be, and federal guidelines change annually. On the one hand, the administrator is mandated to plan and coordinate, but funding seems more readily forthcoming for even isolated direct services. It is the administrator's feeling that she/he must try to be all things to all benefactors, and this has led to growing frustration. The administrator seldom receives positive feedback but is certain to hear any negative feedback regarding agency performance. Because federal cutbacks have limited other employment opportunities, the administrator has given up looking for a different job and merely tries to get through each day with as little difficulty as possible.

The particular role stress involved in this case of burnout is that of role ambiguity (e.g., Rogers and Molnar, 1976). A managerial strategy for reducing role ambiguity and thus indirectly alleviating burnout is the clarification of worker tasks and performance measures. However, it can be argued that the very policies which some individuals administer are themselves intentionally ambiguous (Edelman, 1977; Estes, 1979), thereby introducing role stress into the worker's situation. Intentionally ambiguous or decentrally implemented policies which create administrator role ambiguity nevertheless meet the needs of politicians to respond to demands of increasing constituent groups. Legislators come

to operate with a circuit-breaker orientation (Binstock and Levin, 1976); that is, they pass broad policy statements and delegate the time-consuming process of detailing and implementing the policy to administrators at various levels. A latent function of such a politically expedient posture toward the creation of social policy is role ambiguity and the potential for burnout among administrators.

Two hypothetical situations have now been presented to document the claim that macrosociological variables are important to a fuller understanding of professional burnout. We now turn to the implications of this claim for intervention strategies to alleviate or prevent burnout and for improved research into the problem.

IMPLICATIONS OF A BROADER VIEW

Intervention Strategies
        If the argument presented here is correct, that sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics play a significant role in the generation of professional burnout, then the phenomenon of burnout takes on a new meaning. Insofar as social policies are designed for the benefit of the politician and the larger social order, then the discouragement, the pessimism, and the fatalism that are symptoms of burnout may be a realistic assessment by the service worker or administrator of the situation in which she/he is immersed rather than representing irrational attitudes caused by work exhaustion or personal inadequacies. And insofar as inadequate social policies, ambivalent cultural ideologies, and political imperatives underlie the phenomenon of burnout, the likelihood of burnout can be seen as inherent in the work of service administration and provision. In this regard, then, service workers as well as service recipients may be victimized by the very arrangements which ostensibly have been instituted to alleviate problems. Ironically, providers and consumers often become antagonists as a result of worker burnout, as each blames the other for the shortcomings of their relationship.

The analysis presented in this article suggests that far-reaching intervention strategies for alleviating and preventing burnout must focus on those sociopolitical and sociocultural dynamics with which burnout is ultimately linked. Such strategies have been discussed in a variety of sources (e.g., Lowi, 1969; Binstock and Levin, 1976; Estes, 1979; Wolfensberger, 1972; Howe, 1978), although they have not been associated with the phenomenon of burnout. To make the connection here is to add to the list of dysfunctions generated by social welfare policies and the politics and ideologies from which they are conceptualized; it also serves to strengthen the case for a more critical approach to those policies.

Consequently, addressing the problem of burnout at the social psychological or administrative level in situations informed by the aforementioned policies, politics, and ideologies may provide only short-lived amelioration. This is not to deny that some instances of individual burnout will find their solutions in planned time-outs, mixed caseloads, support systems, and like strategies, but it is to emphasize the many burnout experiences which are structurally induced. In the latter cases, to expect the worker to be rejuvenated by one-time, individualized interventions is to structure the situation further for failure.

If we acknowledge, however, that the potential for burnout is an ongoing hazard of the service workplace, then we need to design regular respites for those workers who implement policies which remain entrenched, although dysfunctional, for the service worker.

For the benefit of service workers as well as service recipients in the long-run, we need to consider more carefully policy options which enhance recipient independence as opposed to creating services dependence, which create explicit priorities and bounded, qualitative objectives, which integrate rather than isolate consumer constituencies, and which combine both visible short-term impact with serious attempts at the long-range improvement of the aggregate status of client groups. These are but a few of the higher-order interventions suggested by sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives in examining the phenomenon of professional burnout.

Research
        This broader view of burnout demands that new research questions be addressed. The bulk of current research has concerned itself with documenting the existence of burnout in various service professions and with identifying social psychological and organizational sources of burnout. The analysis provided in this article suggests that we must focus on the nature of social policies and determine the extent to which various policy characteristics may contribute to professional burnout.

For example, we might explore what relationship policies which are more or less self-implementing have to the experience of professional burnout. Or we might compare the degree of professional burnout in income subsidy versus in-kind service systems. In the former case it could be hypothesized that policies which have a high degree of self-implementation are negatively related to burnout, since role ambiguity would be reduced by such policies. In the latter case, we could hypothesize that burnout would be less likely to occur in income subsidy programs since exchange and power imbalances may be reduced between client and professional, moreso than with the in-kind service system. Consequently, the client may have greater independence, and the professional would be less likely to experience role overload. In such research, it would be important to control for client characteristics (Maslach, 1978) when comparing programmatic and policy impact on professional dispositions.

To date, no strong evaluative research is available regarding the impact of intervention strategies to alleviate burnout. Thus, we do not know whether the strategies oriented to social psycho-

logical or organizational change are effective, either tempo-
rarily or over a longer period of time. While such evaluation
research needs to be undertaken, similar research should be
generated regarding interventions at the level of policy change.
Thus, we might seek to alter certain policy variables hypothe-
sized herein as contributing to professional burnout in chosen
settings where burnout is identified. Measurements relative to
burnout would be obtained both in the short term and over the
long run. These could be compared to similar measurements
obtained from settings whose interventions were either organi-
zationally or individually focused and from a setting which
served as a control. In this manner we could ascertain the
relative benefits of burnout intervention strategies. It may
be that one strategy produces immediate benefits while another
demonstrates long-term impact, thereby suggesting a mix of
interventions for maximum effectiveness.

Conclusion
      The focus in this article on sociocultural and sociopoliti-
cal variables as they may impact on the professional-client
relationship does not deny the operation of organizational and
social psychological determinants of professional burnout.
Rather, the point is to acknowledge that macrosociological
variables are relevant to the issue as well. We have attempted
to illustrate how such variables impact, both directly and
indirectly, in ways that may not be initially obvious in con-
sidering the problem of burnout, and we have suggested alterna-
tive and supplementary interventions and research questions
which flow from such an analysis of the problem. In providing
a broader view of this currently popular issue, it is hoped
that we will begin to take a closer look at social policies
from which service professionals as well as service recipients
stand to benefit or to lose.

                    APPENDIX: THE GENERAL MODEL

      The preceding analysis was based on the variable relation-
ships summarized by the model in Figure 1. The model moves
systematically from higher level social systems to lower level
ones, that is, from sociocultural and sociopolitical issues to
organizational perspectives and finally to a social psychologi-
cal focus, the level at which the phenomenon of burnout mani-
fests itself. In Figure 2 we take a closer look at the organi-
zational and social psychological levels of the model presented
in Figure 1.
      At the highest conceptual level (Figure 1) we notice that
a reciprocal relationship exists between (A) the ideational vari-
ables of cultural values and predominant/dominant ideologies and
(B) the structural and processual characteristics of the political
system. Such cultural ideals as democracy, individualism, and
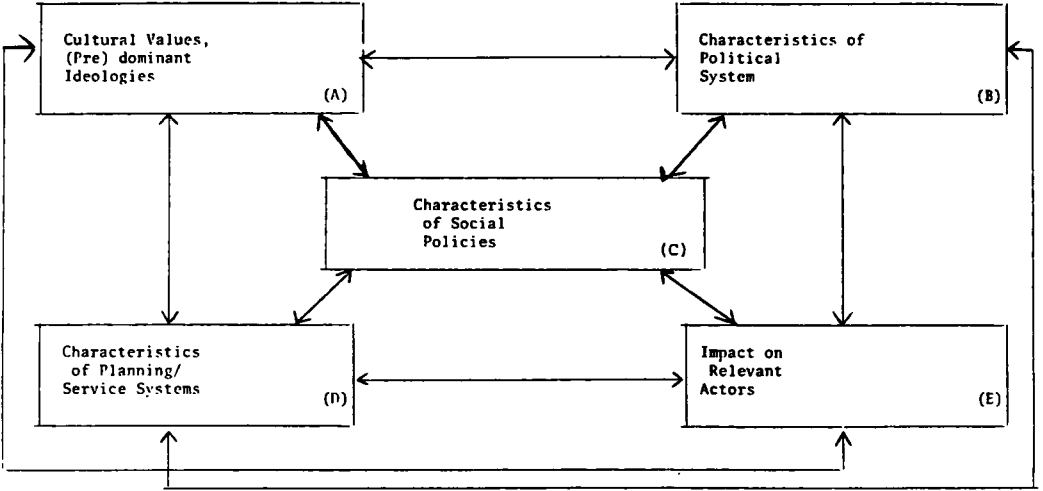pluralism shape both political arrangements and behaviors which

FIGURE 1.

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┌─────────────────────────┐                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Cultural Values,        │←──────────────────→│ Characteristics of      │
│ (Pre) dominant          │                    │ Political               │
│ Ideologies       (A)    │                    │ System           (B)    │
└─────────────────────────┘                    └─────────────────────────┘

              ┌─────────────────────────┐
              │ Characteristics         │
              │ of Social               │
              │ Policies          (C)   │
              └─────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────────┐                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Characteristics         │←──────────────────→│ Impact on               │
│ of Planning/            │                    │ Relevant                │
│ Service Systems  (D)    │                    │ Actors           (E)    │
└─────────────────────────┘                    └─────────────────────────┘
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FIGURE 2

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┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Characteristics     │─────→│ Job                 │←────→│ Client              │
│ of Planning and     │      │ Characteristics     │      │ Characteristics     │
│ Service Systems (D) │      │ (E_{1a})            │      │ (E_{1b})            │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘

                          ┌─────────────────────┐
                          │ Role Stresses       │
                          │ (E_2)               │
                          └─────────────────────┘

                          ┌─────────────────────┐
                          │ Burnout             │
                          │ (E_3)               │
                          └─────────────────────┘
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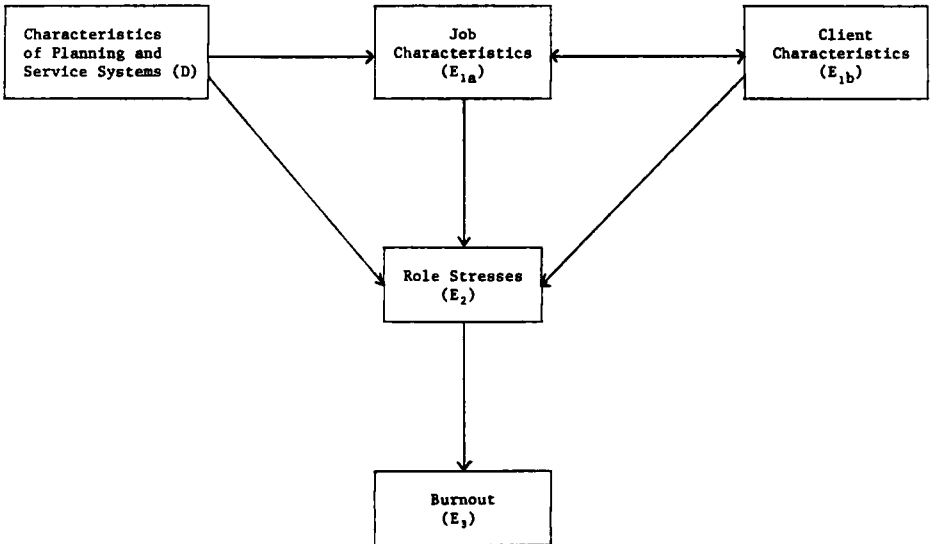
are transacted within political structures (e.g., Anderson, 1975:
29-32; Lowi, 1969), and popular opinion and dominant ideologies
operate to inform politicians which groups are more or less
deserving (Howe, 1978); political behaviors in turn usually
reinforce but may also modify various values and ideologies
(A ↔ B).
    Both of the highest order variables influence the nature of
social policies (C) which emerge from public and private deci-
sion-making units. For example, cultural emphasis on the indivi-
dual guarantees that proposed solutions to social problems will
frequently be focused on individual remediation (A → C). Illus-
trative of political characteristics which influence social
policies (B → C) is the circuit breaker strategy employed by
decision-makers bombarded by constituent requests (Binstock and
Levin, 1976). This strategy involves the passage of broad policy
statements whose details must be negotiated at various administra-
tive levels. The outcome of such a strategy is policies which are
intentionally ambiguous. Indeed, it could be argued that influence
from A → C and B → C occurs in the form of constraints which
beliefs and politics impose upon what is possible through social
policy.
    Attributes of social policies, in turn, may reinforce or
generate changes in the context or content of political games
(C → B), such as in allowing decision-makers to attend to other
constituent groups once at least symbolic efforts have been
devoted to certain of them; or may reinforce or alter the nature
of public sentiments (C → A), such as in formalizing the manner
in which the public comes to think of categories of individuals
(e.g., Wolfensberger, 1972; Estes, 1979).
    These variables, then, represent sociocultural and socio-
political influences which play an initial, and fundamental, role
in establishing parameters within which service professionals and
clients relate. We have only described here the direct variable
relationships; indirect influence between and among variables
operates much more subtly, although nonetheless profoundly.
    We now turn our attention to the organizational level, with
which some burnout literature has concerned itself directly (e.g..
Cherniss, 1980). Salient characteristics of the service system
(D) can be a consequence of the nature of social policies (C → D),
such as creation through policy of designated planning units or
programming bodies (e.g., the Older Americans Act and State Unit
and Area Agencies on Aging); of the nature of the political
system (B → D), such as the occurrence of power fragmentation in
policy implementation (e.g., Binstock and Levin, 1976); or of
dominant beliefs (A → D), such as the organizational decision
regarding which clients are more deserving of scarce resources.
    Reciprocally, certain characteristics of the service system
may alter or reinforce dominant beliefs (D → A), such as in the
segregation of some services which isolate groups from one another
(e.g., Wolfensberger, 1972); may reinforce or alter the actors and
the acts within the political system (D → B), such as in the
spawning of new specialized interest groups from service settings

(e.g., the American Farm Bureau Federation which grew out of the agricultural extension program, and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, emerging as a result of the creation of AAA's by amendment to the Older American Act); and may reinforce or alter the nature of social policies (D → C), such as through the process of goal attenuation or displacement (e.g., Estes, 1973; Hudson and Veley, 1974; Lehman, 1978).

Again, indirect relationships can occur between and among variables A, B, C, and D, although they will not be illustrated here.

The final variable in Figure 1 is the impact on actors in the service system (E). Such actors include service recipients, direct service workers, and service system administrators and supervisors. All four of the previously delineated variables impact on these relevant actors. Dominant ideologies, for example, inform how the service provider and the service recipient will perceive each other (A → E), (e.g., Case and Lingerfelt, 1974; Keith, 1977; Chalfant and Kurtz, 1972; Willie, 1960; Moen, 1978; Cherniss, 1980), while the nature of social policy governs the formal structure of that relationship (C → E); the division of labor within the organized service system operates to determine which service bearers interact with which service recipients (D → E); and the politician's ready espousal of ideas which present quick, tangible results in response to designated crises virtually insures that the identified target population will find no long-term efforts directed in its behalf (B → E) (Binstock and Levin, 1976; Estes, 1979; Edelman, 1977).

In turn, how the relevant actors fare in their interrelationships can feed back into social values and beliefs (E → A), such as the belief that human beings are not very easy to change after all (Etzioni, 1972), or that some groups are more or less deserving (Hudson, 1978; Howe, 1978); into political processes (E → B), such as the emergence of politically-oriented client pressure groups experiencing relative deprivation (e.g. National Welfare Rights Organization); into characteristics of social policies (E → C), such as incremental allocations for seemingly successful programs; and into service system characteristics (E → D), such as the mixing of administrative and direct service work for employees in order to prevent burnout (Maslach and Pines, 1977; Maslach, 1976; Freudenberger, 1974).

Again, this overview does not explore indirect relationships, nor does it describe relationships between various actors accounted for in variable E.

In order to understand how all of these variables relate to burnout, it is necessary to focus further on variable E, the experience of system actors, or more specifically, the experience of individual service professionals, in performing their responsibilities within the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and organizational contexts outlined above. Figure 2 presents a social psychological model of how burnout occurs, utilizing a structural approach to the experience of burnout.

Characteristics of the service system within which one works, characteristics of one's particular job, and characteristics of the clients to whom the service provider relates can generate particular role stresses in attempting to perform work responsibilities ($D{\rightarrow}E_2$; $E_{1a}{\rightarrow} E_2$; $E_{1b}{\rightarrow} E_2$). For example, a fragmented, uncoordinated service system can create for the worker a sense of role frustration; similarly, ambiguous goals for one's work, or lack of feedback regarding one's work, can create role ambiguity (e.g., Hall et.al., 1979; Rogers and Molnar, 1976; Harrison, 1980); finally, role frustration may result from continued contact with clients whose situations show no improvement (Maslach, 1978). Intensive and/or extensive experiencing of role stresses can lead to the dysfunctional consequence for the service system and for the individual of worker burnout (E_3).

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 allow for a broader understanding of the phenomenon of burnout than literature to date has provided. It should be noted, however, that this model does not take into account various mediating influences (e.g., coping strategies, level of commitment) which might intervene in the posited variable relationships. These mediating variables are the subject of a forthcoming paper by the author.

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