



# POSTMODERNITY'S TRANSPOSITION AS AN ACTIVATOR OF HUMAN WORK PROCESS DYSFUNCTIONS AND THE OCCURRENCE OF JOB BURNOUT SYNDROME

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**Abstract.** In the article, the author posits the thesis that postmodernity constitutes a significant distractor of human work processes, causing, among other things, an intensification in the occurrence of job burnout syndrome. Job burnout syndrome, in turn, can be considered a transposer of organizational functioning.

## TRANSPOZYCJA PONOWOCZESNOŚCI JAKO AKTYWATOR DYSFUNKCJI PROCESÓW PRACY LUDZKIEJ I WYSTĘPOWANIA SYNDROMU WYPALENIA ZAWODOWEGO

**Słowa kluczowe:** pedagogika pracy, wypalenie zawodowe, praca, kariera, ponowoczesność

**Streszczenie.** W artykule autorka stawia tezę, że ponowoczesność stanowi istotny dystraktor procesów pracy ludzkiej, powodujący m.in. intensyfikację występowania zjawiska wypalenia zawodowego. Syndrom wypalenia zawodowego z kolei uznać można za transpozytor funkcjonowania organizacji.

## Introduction

Contemporary times (postmodernity) and job burnout share at least two common features. First, they are phenomena that are difficult to definitively frame within exhaustive descriptions. Second, they seem to elude the possibility

of final understanding, resulting in a dangerous tendency to trivialize them, perceived as constructs against which every individual supposedly has sufficient competence to realistically confront and emerge victoriously from the encounter. However, observation of reality encourages the adoption of a different viewpoint: postmodernity is demanding and inherently difficult, and a lack of full understanding of the conditions of functioning within its framework leads to a series of dysfunctions. A glaring example of this can be, among others, the increase in the number of suicides in Poland. It is worth noting here that, according to data from the National Police Headquarters (Komenda Główna Policji, 2023), from January to August 2023, Poland recorded 10,378 suicide attempts, of which 3,620 resulted in death – respectively 4.5% and 4.6% more than in 2022. Yet, these are not the only alarming signals.

From the data provided by the National Police Headquarters, it can also be inferred that the trend of resolving problems through self-aggression has not been curbed among the youngest group – that is, individuals aged 7 to 18 years. Furthermore, according to the report on the implementation of the National Programme for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, in 2022, over 83,000 Blue Card forms were submitted to municipal interdisciplinary teams. In the report “Diagnosis of Violence Against Children in Poland 2023” by the Empowering Children Foundation team (Makaruk et al., 2023), it is confirmed that 79% of surveyed children and adolescents experienced violence or neglect at least once in their lives (in the year preceding the survey, this was 52% of respondents). The most frequently experienced forms of violence were from peers (66%) and from a close adult (32%). Furthermore, 23% of children and teenagers were emotionally neglected, and 14% were witnesses to domestic violence (Makaruk et al., 2023). The pessimistic picture of postmodernity is completed by the fact that Poland has been at the forefront of countries with the highest alcohol consumption for years. The pattern of alcohol consumption is also concerning, as it shifts back towards the Eastern model – with an increasing share of high-proof beverages at the expense of those with lower alcohol content (Fala, 2023).

Analysing the data mentioned above, it becomes increasingly difficult to trust the veracity of the thesis that the disruption of the mental condition of Polish men and women is a temporary trend, responding to changes in living and working conditions due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The annual increase in alarming trends suggests that there are other significant variables the importance of which was not appreciated (at least in the context of claims that the supra-normative phenomena we observe in society in recent years are merely

the result of the pandemic). Moreover, analysing these individual indicators – the scale of violent behaviours, the number of suicide attempts, and the culture of alcohol consumption in Poland – simultaneously provides the basis for formulating the hypothesis that postmodernity, for some individuals, may act as a distractor leading to dysfunctional behaviours. The author – as a labour pedagogue – recognizes a significant link between the psychophysical condition of employees (which may manifest in the workplace as job burnout) and postmodernity, to which further considerations will be devoted in this study.

### **Professional burnout through the lens of theorists and researchers**

Job burnout is a relatively new subject of consideration. The first attempts at scientific analysis of this phenomenon are dated to the 1970s (Kraczla, 2013, p. 75). Previously, the issue of job burnout was not recognized as scientific, and it was even suggested that the symptoms reported by employees, which now fit the characteristics of burnout, were imagined (Sęczkowska, 2020, p. 59). The sudden scientific interest in job burnout, which increased due to the publication of numerous studies and theories based on them in the 1980s, has made job burnout a phenomenon that is scientifically recognized and widely researched today. It is also an increasingly common phenomenon, as confirmed by the analysis of the results of empirical inquiries.

According to a study conducted by the Confederation of Employers and Entrepreneurs, one in five employees is exposed to prolonged stress, which can be a cause of job burnout. Moreover, every fifth manager and nearly every second employee declare that at some stage of their life, they have experienced job burnout. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that between 53% to 70% of companies do not have a policy to counteract job burnout, leaving the vast majority of individuals experiencing job burnout to cope with its symptoms and consequences alone (Confederation of Employers and Entrepreneurs, 2022).

In another study conducted by Jacek Pyżalski and Dorota Merezcz among a random group of 1,214 professionally active teachers in Poland, it was shown that violence from students is a significant burden for teachers and contributes directly to the occurrence of job burnout. The researchers determined that the role of environmental factors is significant and directly affects teachers, carrying dangerous consequences – not only in the form of professional exhaustion but also an increase in aggression, occurrence of violence, or deterioration

of teacher – student relationships (Pyżalski, 2010, pp. 10-14). It is also worth mentioning the studies conducted by Róża Bazińska and Dorota Szczygieł among 214 participants working in broadly defined services. The results obtained by the researchers prove that in this professional group, the predictors of job burnout are emotions experienced during numerous contacts with clients, such as aversion, irritation, or regression (Bazińska, 2012, pp. 1-11).

Given the above conclusions, a question can be formulated: should the cause of the increased occurrence of job burnout syndrome be attributed to the employee's own personality<sup>1</sup>, characterized by immaturity and the presence of psychasthenic traits (Zawadzki, 2007, pp. 100-150) – as some researchers of the phenomenon emphasize – or should it rather be considered that job burnout is the body's response to stress, the source of which is the situation at work (Znańska-Kozłowska, 2013, p. 106)? Each version of the answer to this question raises concerns. Postmodernity poses both a challenge to human mental well-being and changes the workplace, which becomes a source of numerous tensions. The contemporary worker is thus inextricably linked to the continuous growth of expectations and variability, which causes uncertainty. The old workplaces, once characterized by predictability and employment stability, have taken on a different dimension. The prevalence of precarious contracts, part-time, short-term, or intermediary contracts has increased (Chirkowska-Smolak, Grobelny, 2015, p. 13).

The high quality of services and competitiveness mean that employees are currently faced with huge demands, which are constantly multiplying (Knap-Stefaniuk, 2015, p. 23). This situation can be treated as a continuous battle, in the course of which one must quickly adapt to new circumstances and conditions prevailing in the organization, because only a synergistic style of functioning of the employee can promise the maintenance of their employment. Sources of stress in the workplace also include technological progress, competitiveness, the need for high responsiveness within the services provided/ goods produced, or the international nature of markets (Pawlak, 2014, p. 264). This causes some working individuals to operate every day in immense uncertainty and stress, as they are terrified not only by the vision of unemployment but above all by the feeling of being redundant or unnecessary (Bauman, 2004, pp. 57-99). Moreover, this instability can affect anyone, both those at lower and higher levels of an

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the causes of occupational burnout, it is worth mentioning the figure of Leszek Mellibruda, who among the most frequently occurring causes of the phenomenon points to human personality traits. See: idem, *Osobliwości osobowości*. Charaktery, 9 (2004).

organization's structure, in any job. This lack of a concrete formula for achieving satisfying employment for the individual and then maintaining it can be paralyzing for many (Chirkowska-Smolak, Grobelny, 2015, pp. 13-14). Consequently, more and more employees may feel that the demands placed on them are not adjusted to the real possibilities of individual workers or employee teams they are part of, which can ultimately lead to job burnout (Gólczyk, 2015, p. 5). Haste, uncertainty, permanence of transformations, fragility, and the increase in demands, constitutive features of postmodernity, make it possible to attribute the status of a transposition factor in job burnout to postmodernity itself.

### **Transposition, or how postmodernity contributed to the epidemic of job burnout**

Preceding the main considerations with a necessary terminological analysis, it should be noted that according to the PWN Polish Language Dictionary (2023), the term *transposition* means a change in the character of a composition, object, etc. Transposition is also defined as the final effect of this change – what has been created as a result of it.

In music, we experience transposition when a piece is arranged or played in a different key than the one in which it was originally written. In the realm of science, such as mathematics, the term transposition refers to the situation where two adjacent elements of a sequence or two columns or rows of a matrix have been swapped. Paraphrasing, it can be stated that we are dealing with transposition when a certain change occurs. However, this is not a spontaneous change, devoid of intention or being a logical consequence of preceding elements.

Transposition assumes the occurrence of an act of action. Most likely, the act itself is preceded by conscious reflection, the content of which is the will to create something new, as a result of modifying individual elements that in their original version constitute the whole (this is how a musician operates, changing the key in a known piece, leading to the creation of transposition – a piece previously known to listeners, but sounding different), or the will to freely experiment, which inherently assumes being active, without the prior assumption that the action will bring any result (this is how a musician operates, driven by the will to see what happens if certain changes are introduced in a piece that already has its structure; they are driven by curiosity, not by the intention to purposefully

create a new piece, although it is not excluded that as a result of this experimenting, one might emerge).

The author believes that in the case of postmodernity's impact on the intensification of job burnout, we can speak of transposition because postmodernity is an abstract construct and did not have, initially, "at the entrance," defined characteristics. No one provided a set of rules and principles at the dawn of postmodernity that humanity ultimately had to adapt to. Although we often behave as slaves to postmodernity, we are actually its creators. Our decisions and the actions resulting from them change reality daily, though these changes most often escape our conscious minds, focused on a range of other stimuli characteristic of the contemporary world. Sometimes it is only the final effect, constituting the sum of individual decisions and actions from the past, that causes human reflection. We are, as the human species, exactly as in the model of transposition, creators experimenting on the "known work" (i.e., reality), introducing changes to its course, to then experience our creation, which in certain dimensions resembles what is known and safe, but at the same time surprises or even shocks in many ways.

It is important to emphasize that there is one fundamental difference between transposition in the artistic and mathematical sense and the transposition of postmodernity described in this study – in the traditional sense, the author could easily and quickly return to the original starting point. It was enough to reach for the original set of numbers that had been transposed or the original version of the piece that was modified. Perhaps in terms of postmodernity, this would also be possible, although undoubtedly it would not be as simple. However, this awareness should not only terrify but above all encourage greater participation in processes of conscious intellectual processing of reality, so that further steps lead the development of civilization where it is desired from the perspective of the common good, and not where the consequences of unconscious, compulsive decisions lead. We have, after all, too many of the latter. Evidence can be seen in the transformations of the world of work and the intensification of the phenomenon of burnout, which will be discussed in further parts of the article.

## **Job burnout syndrome as a consequence of postmodernity's transposition**

Civilizational transformations are sometimes termed as civilizational development. The author is sceptical of this formulation, as in her perception, it would be more appropriate to speak of civilizational regression. We seem to experience progress only in the information technology sector. However, if we examine the area of human work, we will encounter a series of observations for which a common denominator can likely be established, but it undoubtedly will not be progress.

An illustration of this stance is the reference to pathologies of the work process such as mobbing, i.e., psychological violence in the workplace (Izydorczyk, Kęsa, 2015, p. 77). However, the list of pathologies associated with the work environment is significantly longer – it includes corruption, social parasitism, nepotism, blackmail, manipulation, selfishness, or sexual harassment (Polanowska, 2018, p. 59). Their analysis, although not the subject of this article, can be one of the significant perspectives for analysing the postmodern work environment.

Returning to the main considerations, it can be pointed out that one aspect of postmodernity's transposition is the occurrence of increased stress, which destructively impacts many areas of human life – including the functioning of individuals at work. Among the possible categories of environmental factors causing stress, we can identify:

- Career (including low status, high ambitions, lack of prospects);
- Relationships (lack of support, inability to consciously create healthy interactions, boundary violations, communication disorders);
- Work (pace, changes, conditions, pressure, earnings not sufficient to meet needs);
- Place in the organization – workplace (dependence, inadequacy, variability of roles);
- Climate and organizational structure (isolation, communication problems);
- Additional sources – e.g., crises, difficulties in personal life (Polanowska, 2018, p. 6).

All these factors undoubtedly contribute to significant devastation in the human psyche (Znańska-Kozłowska, 2013, p. 108), and in the work environment, this state can take the form of job burnout, among others. This, in turn, can be

observed through a series of characteristic symptoms, described by Christina Maslach in the category of:

- Loss of energy (tremendous stress, tension, and exhaustion, overwhelmed by duties);
- Loss of enthusiasm (cynicism, a sense of burdensomeness, reluctance in relationships and actions);
- Loss of self-confidence, lack of engagement, and energy (Maslach, 2010).

In turn, Dagmara Szonert-Rzepecka (2010, p. 33) points out that the occurrence of job burnout syndrome leads to a series of negative consequences related to the sphere of:

- Emotions (indifference, decreased satisfaction with achievements, irritation, decreased emotional control, resistance, irritability, aversion, deterioration of relations with family members, decline in empathy and positive feelings, emotional instability, annoyance, tearfulness, anxiety);
- Thinking (lack of trust, problems with concentration and memory, stereotyping, isolation, lowered self-esteem, negativism, feeling of incompetence, helplessness, hostility, thoughts focused on suicide and escape);
- Behaviour and motivation (lack of willingness, objectification of relationships, cynicism, family and marital problems, blaming others, decrease in motivation, problems with decision-making, scolding attitude, recurring absence from the workplace);
- Health and well-being (immense fatigue, sleep disturbances, addictions, weight loss, exhaustion, loss of appetite, frequent illnesses, pains, gastrointestinal complaints, psychosomatic symptoms).

In the context of the most frequently occurring symptoms related to the phenomenon of job burnout, one can distinguish:

- “Physical exhaustion;
- Somatic and functional disturbances;
- Outbursts of anger and irritation;
- Periods of inactivity at work;
- Initiating conflicts at work;
- Avoiding decisions;
- Change in behaviours [...] – excessive alcohol consumption, drug abuse;
- Lack of identification with the profession” (Kamrowska, 2007, p. 318).

If we assume that the key element of every organisation is human capital, then undoubtedly observing even one of the above symptoms of job burnout should be considered highly undesirable – threatening the well-being of the organisation,



including its financial outcomes. It is important to emphasise that the consequence of job burnout can also be the individual's desire to leave the profession, which for the organisation could mean a drain of human capital. Job burnout for the organisation is therefore a significant threat, which will be felt through:

- Incurring expenses related to finding another employee,
- Increased expenditure on sick leave,
- Decreased company productivity,
- Employee absenteeism,
- Staff turnover,
- Increased expenses on legal proceedings and employee treatment,
- Deteriorating relationships among employees, and between employees and supervisors (Bilska, 2004, p. 1-4).

Furthermore, referring to the theory of learning through modelling, which has significant application in the case of adults, it can be assumed that one employee affected by job burnout may constitute the first link in a chain of professionally burned-out staff. Often, the phenomenon of burnout also gives rise to the socially undesirable phenomenon of perceiving human work as meaningless, and the evolution of this phenomenon can turn into a severe existential crisis for an individual, characterized by the loss of any sense of existence and immense disappointment with life (Sokołowska, 2007, p. 2).

An individual in crisis, through their daily decisions and behaviours, transposes postmodernity – again towards an undesirable direction from the perspective of the common good. Optimistically, we might assume the possibility of interrupting this sequence of events, but available data seem to challenge this possibility. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the widely recognized 12 stages of job burnout, developed by Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North<sup>2</sup>, prompt reflection that the early stages of job burnout are profitable for the employer, and even expected by them! In this concept, the employee initially feels a constant need to prove their own worth, which manifests through setting high expectations for oneself (stage I).

Subsequently, there is a phenomenon (stage II) which, from the perspective of the efficiency of human work, is commonly considered desirable, i.e., an increase in engagement in the work performed, characterized by frequently taking on tasks of others, and the idea of delegating tasks is seen as a threat to one's

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from: Litzke, S.M., Schuh, H. (2007). *Stres, mobbing i wypalenie zawodowe*. Gdańsk: GWP, pp. 169-171.

indispensability. The employee's own needs are pushed to the background (stage III). There emerges a neglect of pleasures, sexual needs, social contacts, a lack of relaxation, and sleep problems. All the time available to the employee may be devoted to performing work or thinking about it (planning, designing, etc.). Only later do stages that are unfavourable for the employer appear (Freundenberger, North, cited in: Litzke, Schuh, 2007, pp. 169-171):

- Stage IV: Imbalance between internal and external needs, leading to a significant drop in energy (abnormal behaviours, previously not present, such as mixing up meeting dates, people, lack of punctuality);
- Stage V: Change in values (reevaluation of priorities and life goals, considering contacts with other people as burdensome);
- Stage VI: Mechanism of repression in relation to the problems occurring (decrease in efficiency, isolation from the world, rapid loss of patience, aggression, cynicism, loss of empathy, helplessness);
- Stage VII: Withdrawal (alienation, embarrassment, society perceived as hostile, feeling of lack of prospects and orientation, replacing unmet needs with drugs, alcohol, or another addictive substance);
- Stage VIII: Changes in behaviour (further process of withdrawal and isolation, perceiving interest as an attack, paranoid reactions);
- Stage IX: Feeling of lack of personal identity (belief in automatic functioning and loss of autonomy of existence);
- Stage X: Feeling of inner emptiness (phobic reactions, panic attacks, anxiety, desolation);
- Stage XI: Depression as a determinant of the general state (apathy, internal pain, despair, worsened mood, suicidal thoughts);
- Stage XII: Full-blown job burnout phenomenon (emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion, heart diseases and other systems, susceptibility to infections).

How, then, can we find a balance between a phenomenon that is beneficial for the employer and the destruction of the employee? How to effectively determine the moment when an employee dangerously transposes from stage III to stage IV? And is it even possible in light of the data presented by the author in the *Introduction* to this article – that only a few companies have programs to prevent the occurrence of job burnout? And finally, how to cope with the increase in the occurrence of job burnout, since the characteristics of postmodernity seem to amplify it? Are we able to apply the second of the possible paths

of transposition – to introduce an act of action, preceded by conscious reflection? The author currently cannot answer these questions.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, the author has endeavoured to prove that postmodern work conditions can act as a distractor for the intensified emergence of the job burnout phenomenon, and active job burnout syndrome should be viewed as a transposer of human work processes. However, as long as we remain within the scope of interpreting job burnout as a phenomenon unfolding solely on an individual and personal dimension (beginning and ending in the human individual, being a consequence of “the individual’s psychic weakness”), discussions about the efficiency of work processes, building effective teams, and internal motivation of employees will remain “flat,” covering only the surface of the problem.

Postmodernity changes us. The person of Western culture is tired, sick, and overstimulated. We are exhausted by the daily rush, and the influx of intrusive thoughts prevents us from relaxing even during night-time rest or vacation. It is increasingly difficult for us to focus on a task as we are permanently subjected to distracting factors. We flee from our natural herd instinct because being in a group has become more and more frustrating.

Employers cannot ignore the new characteristic of contemporary human capital, pretending that the discomfort resulting from experiencing the incomprehensible postmodernity by their employees does not affect the efficiency of the services provided or the ongoing work processes. Job burnout has long ceased to be a problem concerning individual employees. We may still consider that caring for mental well-being is a duty resting solely on the employee. However, looking at the data analysed in the introduction to this article and considering the fact that elements of psychological education are non-existent in Polish schools, it is hard to believe that the average employee is capable of taking responsibility for this area of their development. As long as work processes in most cases require human participation, employers should remain keenly interested in ensuring their employees are proactive and effective at work. This is not possible without considering aspects that cover their psychophysical condition.

It is important to highlight that there are theoretical solutions suggesting that the occurrence of job burnout does not have to signal the end of effective work. The job burnout team can also be analysed by distinguishing five phases and associated symptoms (Kamrowska, 2007, p. 318):

- 1) Honeymoon phase (feeling of satisfaction and enchantment with work, full of enthusiasm and energy);
- 2) Awakening (greater dedication to work, working to maintain an idealistic vision of work);
- 3) Stagnation (problems in social contacts, feeling of fatigue and effort in accomplishing tasks);
- 4) Full-blown burnout (desire to escape, emptiness, loneliness, mental and physical exhaustion);
- 5) Resurgence (the process of returning to one's former self).

Understood in this way, job burnout takes the form of a circle, the last stage of which is a return to the roots and the regaining of former balance and agency – also in the work situation. However, for this to happen, the person experiencing job burnout must have access to psychoeducational tools.

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