



Work-Life Conflict: Parental Burnout, a New Model

Conflicto entre la vida familiar y la vida laboral: síndrome de agotamiento parental, un nuevo modelo

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the workplace, education, and family dynamics. Despite these disruptions, limited research has examined parental burnout within organizational contexts. This article uses the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development to expand the understanding of parental burnout and to identify its contributing factors. Unlike work exhaustion, parental exhaustion should be recognized as a distinct syndrome that requires a multifaceted approach. The study contributes to the literature through bibliometric analysis. It proposes Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory as a foundation for a systemic model of parental burnout and its effects on work-life balance. Furthermore, structural gender inequality has not been adequately considered in the context of parental burnout, nor has the phenomenon been addressed from a systemic perspective.

Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 alteró el entorno laboral, la educación y la dinámica familiar. A pesar de estas alteraciones, son escasos los estudios que han analizado el síndrome de agotamiento parental en el contexto de las organizaciones. Este artículo se vale de la teoría de los sistemas bioecológicos del desarrollo humano para ampliar la comprensión del síndrome de agotamiento parental y determinar sus factores contribuyentes. A diferencia del agotamiento laboral, el agotamiento parental debe reconocerse como un síndrome diferenciado para el que hace falta un enfoque multifacético. El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre la cuestión con un análisis bibliométrico. Propone la teoría de los sistemas bioecológicos de Bronfenbrenner como base para formular un modelo sistémico del síndrome de agotamiento parental y sus efectos en la conciliación entre la vida laboral y personal. Además, la desigualdad estructural de género no se ha tenido debidamente en cuenta ni se ha abordado el fenómeno desde una perspectiva sistémica.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Parental burnout, organizational policies, government policies, gender, childcare, work-life conflict / Síndrome de agotamiento parental, políticas y procedimientos de las organizaciones, políticas gubernamentales, género, puericultura, conflicto entre la vida familiar y la vida profesional.

JEL Classification / Clasificación JEL: I54, J16, I12, J28, J81.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic (hereinafter referred to as “the pandemic”) highlighted and exacerbated the systemic disadvantages faced by working parents. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), the OECD average of children aged 0-14 living in households where both parents work full- or part-time is 62.7%. The employment rates for mothers with a partner and single women were 74.3% and 71.4%, respectively, in 2021 (OECD, 2023), indicating high employment among parents. The work-life conflict for these working parents can be overwhelming, increasing the risk of parental burnout.

We argue that parental burnout is a symptom of deep structural inequity associated with gender gaps at the societal, organizational, and family levels. Maslach et al. (2001) state that continuous exposure to stressful environments, such as increased workload, contributes to the burnout syndrome. Burnout is accepted as an occupational phenomenon (WHO, 2021; Colín Flores, 2019). Mikolajczak and Roskam (2018) expanded the concept of burnout by identifying parental burnout, a three-pronged stress condition resulting from chronic stress arising from parenting demands exceeding parenting resources (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2022).

Parenting stress can stem from poor work-family balance, as work demands deplete personal resources needed for parenting (Chung et al., 2023). Wang et al. (2021) found that parental burnout can lead to job burnout, but the relationship did not apply in reverse. Evans et al. (2023) provide evidence that parental burnout impacts workplace behaviours and call for further research on the interplay between parental and job burnout. In the subsequent sections, we review the literature on parental burnout and propose a systemic model of parental burnout, accompanied by testable propositions.

2. A Review of Parental Burnout

The term “burnout” first emerged in the workplace to describe the extreme exhaustion experienced by health care professionals (Freudenberger, 1974). Then, in the early 1980s, Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal fulfilment at work, commonly

seen in health care and other helping professions. Burnout is a multi-stage process (Leiter & Maslach, 2016) that begins with an imbalance between work demands and individual resources (Cherniss, 1980), leading to exhaustion, anxiety, and eventually depersonalization. From the outset, Maslach and Jackson (1981) and Freudenberger (1974) stated that job and parental burnout share similar aspects (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Some researchers detected analogous signs between parents and healthcare professionals, whereby both experience burnout in different settings (Pérez-Díaz & Oyarce Cádiz, 2019).

Parental burnout, as a valid construct, is a recent development in research derived from the concept of job burnout (Roskam et al., 2017; Roskam et al., 2018). A meta-analysis of previous studies in the field (Paula et al., 2021) identified the risk factors of parental burnout, including: parental personality traits and stress; parental factors, such as personal sacrifices due to parenting role; family conflicts and disorganization; an imbalance between risks and resources; depression; financial difficulties and unemployment; life without a partner; parenting at a young age; having more than one child; and children's personality traits, particularly meticulousness and a lack of emotional control.

The conclusions of the Paula et al. (2021) meta-analysis focus on individual characteristics of parents or children. It is important to recognize that parenting does not occur in isolation, and environmental factors can contribute to increased or decreased parental stress. Some studies (e.g., Mikolajczak et al., 2021; Breevaart & Bakker, 2011) have suggested taking a broader perspective on parental burnout as a social phenomenon. The pandemic heightened the risk of burnout for working parents, especially women, as they juggled childcare and work responsibilities in a highly stressful environment. This assertion is supported by Mucharraz y Cano et al. (2023), who found that mothers in leadership positions were more affected by job burnout than fathers during the pandemic.

The assessment and measurement of parental burnout may be considered relatively recent, as the earliest article identified is "Exhausted Parents: Development and Preliminary Validation of the Parental Burnout Inventory", by Roskam et al. (2017). Therefore, further research is needed across diverse cultural contexts and parental circumstances to strengthen the validity of parental burnout assessments and measures. The article "Parental Burnout Around the Globe: A 42-Country Study" is a good example of the kind of research needed to advance the measurement and understanding of parental burnout across diverse contexts (Roskam et al., 2021). Similarly, research is needed to identify the internal and external factors

that contribute to or alleviate this problem. This research is specifically designed to address that gap in the literature. We suggest a systemic theory is needed to fully understand the causes of parental burnout and its impact on the work-life balance of working parents, given the complexity of human interaction and stress triggers.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Bibliometric Analysis

Pritchard (1969) established that the use of mathematical and statistical tools—that is, quantitative methods—to analyze scientific publications such as books, academic journals, and other media should be referred to as bibliometric analysis. Bibliometric analysis has grown considerably in recent years. The literature analysis was guided by a constructionist approach, in which the systemic epistemological roots of the phenomenon under study provided an understanding of empirical reality (Holstein, 2017).

Our research aims to identify articles that establish a relationship between burnout in familiar and job contexts. In an initial search across Scopus, EBSCO, Elsevier, and Google Scholar, 48 articles were identified through thematic filtering using terms related to parental burnout. This inclusion criterion is shown in Table 1 (see Table 1). A subsequent review was conducted to determine whether the studies addressed work-related issues. Based on this initial set, we searched for the key concept “parental burnout” across CrossRef, the Semantic Scholar API, PubMed API, arXiv API, OpenAlex, and DOAJ.

Table 1. Inclusion Criterion

Inclusion
Peer-reviewed articles with “parental burnout” in their title
Peer-reviewed articles with “burnout”, “family”, “mother”, “motherhood” in the keywords
Peer-reviewed articles with “stress” and “family”, “mother”, “motherhood”.
Articles in English and Spanish

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Using this analysis, we found 52 articles published between 2023 and 2026. By integrating the first and second selections of articles, we identified 152 articles on parental burnout published between 1981 and 2025, with a peak in 2017, when Roskam et al. (2017) introduced the term to describe the phenomenon and developed a set of questions to recognize it.

As noted by Mikolajczak et al. (2023), the roots of the parental burnout construct can be traced back to the 1980s. For example, an early reference is the book *Parent Burnout* by Procaccini and Kiefaber (1983); however, this publication was not peer reviewed. Within the scientific literature, one of the earliest peer-reviewed contributions was Lindahl's (2007) study, which examined burnout among mothers and fathers of children who had survived brain tumors, thereby situating burnout within the parenting domain. In subsequent years, related research began to address the intersection between parenting demands and occupational pressures. For example, Wierda-Boer et al. (2009) examined work-family interference in dual-earner couples, whereas Lindström et al. (2010) documented elevated burnout symptoms among parents of chronically ill children and identified work-related strain as a relevant contextual factor.

On this basis, parental burnout may be considered an emerging research topic from approximately 2009 onward, although publication activity remained modest until the field expanded substantially after 2018. From that point onward, the annual number of publications increases noticeably, with two peaks in 2021 and 2024, each at 21 articles. The pandemic period proved pivotal for parental burnout research, with 58 publications published between 2020 and 2022. Since 2021, a sustained interest in the topic has emerged, with an average of 20 articles published annually through 2024, as shown in Table 2 (see Table 2) and as represented in Figures 1 and 2 (see Figure 1 and Figure 2)

3.2 Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development

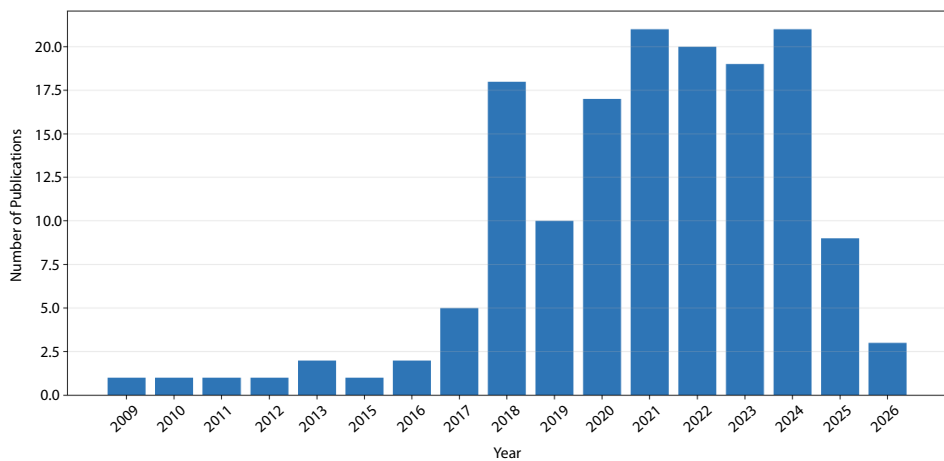
In this paper, the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development was used to study parental burnout from a holistic perspective. This theory helps understand parental burnout as a social and community phenomenon, adopting a systemic approach given the complexity of human interaction and stressor triggers.

Table 2. Bibliometrics by Year

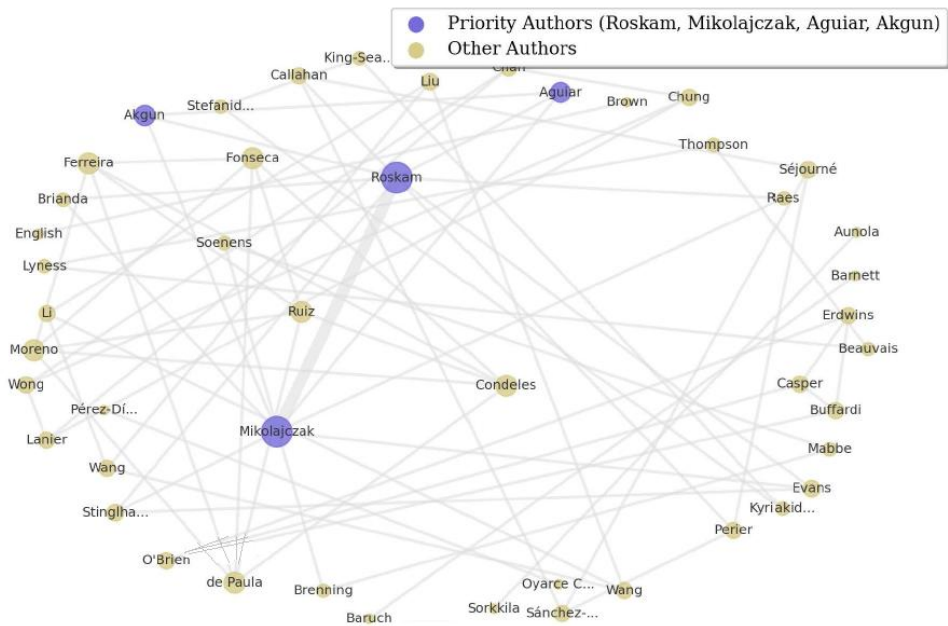
Year	Publications	Unique Authors	Unique Keywords	Collaborative Authors	Recurring Keywords
2009	1	3	12	0	0
2010	1	3	9	0	0
2011	1	3	11	0	0
2012	1	4	9	0	0
2013	2	6	21	0	0
2015	1	3	10	0	0
2016	2	6	21	0	1
2017	5	13	20	3	11
2018	18	22	65	7	31
2019	10	23	45	2	13
2020	17	37	81	2	19
2021	21	57	106	6	20
2022	20	49	70	5	31
2023	19	55	98	9	35
2024	21	55	105	4	27
2025	9	69	87	8	15
2026	3	13	35	3	4

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 1. Publications per Year



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 2. Coauthors Map

Source: Prepared by the authors with code by Julius AI.

The classic Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development, where the person-process-context model was explored, studies the ecology of the family research through four levels of nested contexts: (a) microsystems, (b) mesosystems, (c) exosystems, and (d) macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Peterson, 2014). These levels range from the smallest unit of analysis to the broader external social systems that interact dynamically. The Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) was selected because it provided a holistic framework for addressing areas that could generate stressors for parents, as well as support structures that could help reduce parental stress.

Parental burnout, like job burnout, is influenced by various factors, including cultural expectations, government and organizational policies, and personal characteristics. Additionally, parental burnout can be mitigated through social support and individual measures (Mikolajczak et al., 2021; Gülbetekin & Tunç, 2023). This distinction is crucial because a more comprehensive understanding of parental and

job burnout reveals that some missing resources stem from factors regulated at the governmental or organizational level, as well as access to support from extended family and friends.

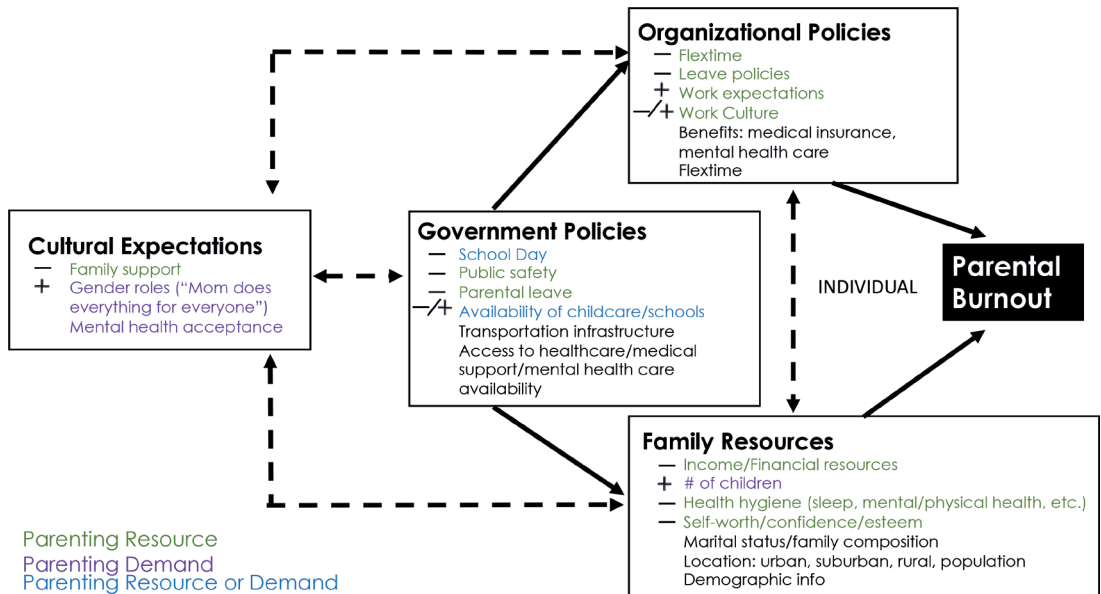
Prior research highlights the interplay between parenting demands and resource requirements (Mikolajczak et al., 2018; Gülbetekin & Tunç, 2023). However, other factors, such as working conditions, parental workload (Roskam et al., 2021; Gabriel et al., 2020), and job design—which affect working parents in particular—may still need to be understood as part of a dynamic interaction. Bronfenbrenner's (1986) systemic approach offers a framework for developing a dynamic model of how various factors interact to influence parental burnout.

The proposed model consists of a set of systems and subsystems and suggests that parental burnout may be related to contextual variables. These factors include cultural norms within the macrosystem and government policies in the exosystem that intersect with the individual's work and family subsystems, potentially leading to job and parental burnout. We suggest that important factors to consider when examining the antecedents of parental burnout are (a) cultural factors like masculinity, (b) government infrastructure, including regulating leisure time, reconciling work and school schedules, supporting students' mobility, subsidizing childcare, mandating parental leave, and providing access to after-school activities; (c) job designs that allocate fair workloads, worker flexibility, and work schedules that allow for sufficient free time and rest; and (d) extra-familial support, including the help of extended family and friends (Mikolajczak et al., 2021). In the following sections, we describe the components of our model, shown in Figure 3 (see Figure 3).

3.2.1 Cultural Expectations

At the macrosystems level of the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Peterson, 2014), we suggest that cultural factors or expectations influence parents' susceptibility to parental burnout. Previous gender studies have focused on cultural expectations regarding the participation of men and women in family and job roles separately, including the tension that results from the need to address both. In countries with masculine cultures, gender roles are clearly defined and expect women to have more caring and modest attitudes, while men are expected to be competitive and assertive (Hofstede, 2011). The literature also identified the expectation that women allocate more time to unpaid household activities, especially in parenthood (Roskam et al., 2021). In contrast, countries with feminine cultures,

Figure 3. Model Components



Source: Prepared by the authors.

which have more egalitarian views of parental responsibilities (Hofstede, 2011), both parents share the burden of childcare. Placing all or most parenting responsibilities on one parent leaves them with depleted parenting resources and may be a precursor to parental burnout. Furthermore, the complexity of women's gender roles has increased as they seek to mitigate work-life conflict (Brenning et al., 2022).

At the macrosystem level, cultural norms for parenting provide the context for government policies, regulations, and legislation. Broadly speaking, cultural norms can directly influence individual behavior and are reflected in governmental decisions. Therefore, we advance the following proposition:

P1. More masculine cultures may be associated with parental burnout in working parents, indirectly through government policies that are not egalitarian for parents and directly through an unequal division of parenting and care responsibilities.

3.2.2 Government Policies

At the exosystem level, we suggest that governmental policies influence parents' susceptibility to parental burnout, depending on whether family-friendly policies are in place. Labor legislation requires a healthy work environment for pregnant employees (Casas & Herrera, 2012), but there are no such requirements for fathers. For example, the United States is the only OECD country without a federal law for paid parental leave (Livingston & Thomas, 2019). Defining family policy and norms that directly affect families must be taken seriously (Ooms, 2019) and reflected in government policies that support parents. Governments can implement policies such as subsidized childcare, day care centers, or paid sick leave to alleviate some of the pressures parents face, thereby mitigating the risk of parental burnout.

At the exosystem level, governmental regulations provide the legal framework that supports parents through family-friendly policies. Government regulations reflect the cultural environments in which they operate, but they also offer an opportunity to mitigate the adverse effects parents face. By providing parents with access to additional resources through family-friendly government policies, governments may reduce the likelihood of parental burnout. Therefore, we advance the following proposition:

P2. Family-friendly government policies may be associated with reduced parental burnout.

3.2.3 Organizational Policies

At the mesosystems level, we suggest that family-friendly organizational policies can mitigate the conflict between work and parental responsibilities, thereby minimizing the likelihood of parental burnout. While previous sections discussed the impact of broader policies and norms on parents, this section focuses on how organizational policies can affect the risk of burnout among working parents.

In organizations, demands are typically job-related, while parenting demands refer to the ongoing caregiving requirements that change over time as children mature. In addition to providing employees with a living wage that adequately compensates them for their work, organizations can enact policies that are valuable resources in

family-friendly work environments (FFWEs). There are two main conceptual categories of FFWEs: (a) work-family programs, policies, and benefits, which include flexibility in work arrangements, parental leave policies, and childcare resources and support; and (b) family-friendly working cultures that support employees' caregiving responsibilities (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006; Hill et al., 2008).

When organizations adopt family-friendly policies such as flexible work arrangements and childcare assistance, they signal their support for families by instituting policies that support employees' caregiving responsibilities. In many cases, transformational leadership and family-friendly organizations create a virtuous circle by positively affecting workers' personal and family lives, which, in turn, benefit work outcomes (Kossek et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2008). While organizations may adopt such policies to improve employee performance, they can also create an environment that reduces parental burnout by providing employees with additional resources. A family-friendly work culture (FFWC) exists when employees perceive that the organization "supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives" (Thompson et al., 1999, p. 394). In organizations with an FFWC, managers support employees in establishing boundaries between their work and family lives, provide reasonable work schedules, and do not expect employees to be available outside work hours.

At the mesosystem level, organizational policies can support working parents through family-friendly measures. Organizations with FFWE or FFWC can provide employees with support that helps them balance the competing demands of work and parenting responsibilities while minimizing conflict between the two. By supporting working parents with family-friendly policies, organizations can reduce the likelihood of parental burnout. Therefore, we advance the following proposition:

P3. Working parents at organizations with FFWEs and FFWC may be less likely to experience parental burnout.

3.2.4 Family Resources

At the microsystem level, we suggest that work-family conflict (WFC), stemming from the availability of family resources for managing parenting and household care responsibilities, may influence parental burnout. Parenting can be a major stressor and source of role overload for women, who may feel overwhelmed by demands they feel they cannot adequately meet (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Conley & Woosley, 2000; English & Brown, 2023). Parental role overload can contribute to stress, fatigue (Conley & Woosley, 2000), and parental burnout.

Managing work and family responsibilities simultaneously can create challenges for employees, especially those with significant family obligations (Kossek et al., 2023; Stefanidis et al., 2021). The conflict between work and life responsibilities can lead to individual problems (Karasek, 1979; Brenning et al., 2022) and organizational issues (Lourel et al., 2009). Frone et al. (1992) demonstrated bidirectional interference in WFC, such that work may interfere with family life and vice versa (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). WFC is a source of stress and role strain among women (Erdwins et al., 2001), can lead to emotional exhaustion (Halbesleben et al., 2012), and is associated with burnout (Rupert et al., 2009).

At the microsystem level, family resources, such as the number of children or grandparental support, can help working parents manage the conflict between work and family responsibilities. Family resources may prevent parental burnout by mitigating the impact of work-family or family-work conflict. By using family resources to manage work-family conflict, working parents may reduce the likelihood of parental burnout. Therefore, we advance the following proposition:

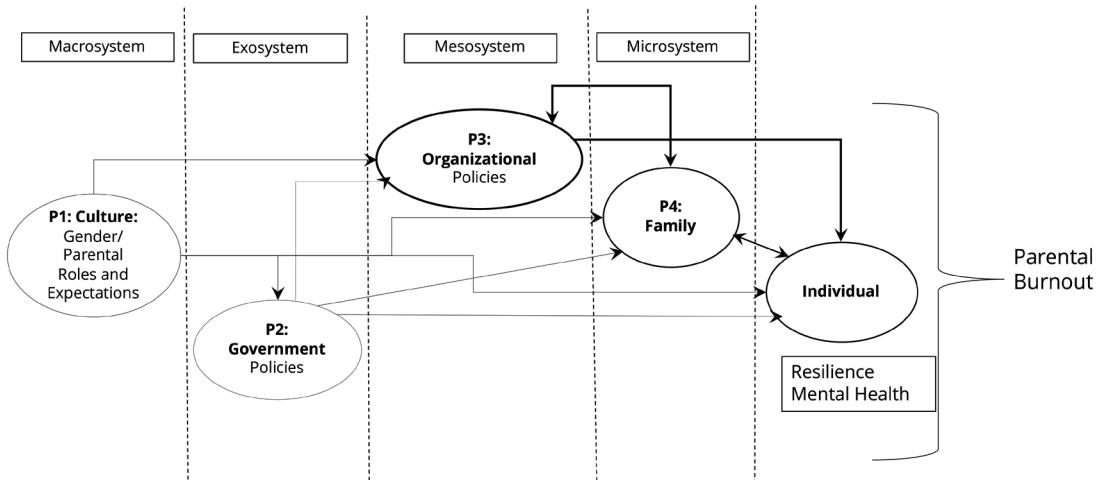
P4. Working parents may be less likely to experience parental burnout if there is no work-family conflict and role overload.

Drawing on the analysis underlying each of the propositions, Figure 4 integrates the set of factors identified in the literature as contributing to both parental burnout and job burnout (see Figure 4). These factors are organized within Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems framework, thereby offering a systemic representation of the multiple levels at which stressors emerge and, importantly, where targeted interventions may be implemented to prevent, mitigate, or reduce burnout.

4. Results

This article uses the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Peterson, 2014) as a framework to expand our understanding of parental burnout and identify its contributing factors. Parental burnout is a complex issue stemming from the disproportionate work and family responsibilities parents face. The Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) provides a useful foundation for analyzing parental burnout beyond individual traits and for developing a systemic model that incorporates the intersecting work and family environments. These environments are intrinsically linked and cannot be considered independent of their associated subsystems.

Figure 4. Parental Burnout Systemic Model



Source: Prepared by the authors.

While we argue that parental burnout is a consequence of systemic factors rather than individual characteristics, we also identified the role organizational policies may play in exacerbating or alleviating parental burnout. Insofar as all factors in the model are integrated and help reduce it, the result of work-life conflict will be lessened.

There cannot be a single solution to work-family conflict; rather, all elements of the model must complement one another, with the organization playing a decisive role. This study allows us to argue that there is little literature on the subject and that organizations must increasingly understand the predominant role they play in preventing work-life balance among their employees. Further research is needed to better understand parental burnout. The proposed conceptual model should be tested to explore the interactions between work cultures and family arrangements across different countries.

5. Conclusions

Highly masculine cultures often prioritize economic competition and traditional gender roles over social welfare. Because these cultural values shape the legal

framework, they place pressure on individual families. In these environments, FFWs and FFWCs are vital resources that reduce daily domestic demands and mitigate parental burnout driven by work-family conflict and role overload.

Without government safety nets, working parents must handle everything on their own. Because traditional gender roles are strong, labor is divided unfairly. Working mothers take on the “second shift” of physical chores alongside the heavy mental load of organizing family life.



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