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**Burnout syndrome in freelancers:
factors, diagnosis and prevention of occupational distress**

Abstract
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The dissertation contains 225 pages. The scientific development contains 50 tables and 55 figures. The literature used includes 292 sources in Bulgarian and English. It consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, limitations of the study, contributions, bibliography and two appendices.

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The materials for the defense are available to those interested at the “Paisiy Hilendarski” PU, 24 “Tsar Asen” Str., “Development of the academic staff and doctoral studies” department.

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INTRODUCTION

A few decades ago, it was difficult to find a person who had information about burnout. Today we can categorically state that the defeats resulting from this condition are well known to our modern society. The list of areas with an increased risk of professional burnout in recent years covers an increasingly wide range of professions – police officers, teachers, IT specialists, journalists, artists, doctors, accountants, scientists, etc.

Research indicates that this burnout is primarily related to factors of the professional environment and only secondarily to factors at the individual level (e.g., personality characteristics) and extra-professional or general factors (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2010; Shanafelt et al., 2017). In this regard, many studies have aimed to identify the main risks of the occurrence of burnout syndrome and note that the main problem arising from this condition is associated with emotional disturbances that hinder professional and social functioning (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Seiduanova, 2017; Lastovkova et al., 2018; Woo, Tang, & Tam, 2020).

The distress of the uncertainty of freelancing is hard to overcome. Regardless of business planning or strategizing, one unforeseen detail can change all plans and derail a contract (Alammyan, 2021). The economic environment is dynamic: a strategy that was successful yesterday is not certain to be successful today. Flexibility, quick adaptation and response to changes regardless of the situation are basic requirements for the exercise of this type of activity (Radzievskaya, 2020). Many of the challenges of freelancing are related to starting and running a business, such as planning the work day, negotiating with clients, enforcing self-discipline and achieving productivity, building a solid online presence, creating a steady stream of projects, emotionally dealing with customer loss etc. These commitments lead to the increase of socio-psychological risks among freelancers. They are a prerequisite for workplace distress, which has been identified by the WHO as one of the main problems in the lives of working people (Leka, S. et al., 2003).

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation study has a standard structure. The first chapter (“Theoretical background”) is divided into six points, which successively present the key constructs for the topic.

The first of them aims to reveal the essence of the gig economy as a factor for the intensive increase of freelancing. More important theoretical points are noted.

The second point in the first chapter introduces the essence of freelancing, as well as the relationship between concepts such as self-insurance and self-employment. Basic concepts of the constructs, their definition and basic theoretical perspectives for research are presented. An in-depth study was carried out with the idea of a more detailed and substantive understanding.

In the third point, basic theoretical approaches and views for the study of distress are presented. Attention is paid to professional distress, and its elements and theoretical models are presented. The peculiarities of the perception of environmental factors by the individual, his reactions, as well as the possible consequences of the influence of this condition on his health are presented.

The fourth and fifth points are related to the definition of the burnout construct. The concepts of the construct are reviewed, their development is followed, and the main symptoms and manifestations of burnout are outlined. The stages in the process of its development are presented.

The sixth point presents the psycho-physiological aspects of distress and resilience, a number of psycho-social factors that contribute to resilience have been identified.

The second chapter presents the design of the empirical study. The components traditionally contained in it are defined, the instrument used and the contingent of examined persons are presented, as well as the stages of the conducted research.

The third chapter contains a detailed quantitative (based on statistical methods) and qualitative (content) analysis of the results of the empirical research. A description of approaches to prevention and therapy is made. An integrated diagnostic tool for the assessment of occupational burnout is presented, followed by the contributions, limitations of the study, and a conclusion.

FIRST CHAPTER THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

1. Gig economy – definition and factors

The concept of “workplace stress” along with categories such as “social-psychological risks” and “job security” are currently some of the most discussed topics in social psychology, sociology of work and management. This is due to structural changes in the field of employment, due to which working life is increasingly filled with uncertainty.

In early 2013, five years before the Great Recession, seven million jobs across the European Union were closed. On average, one in ten people is out of work, and countries like Spain and Greece have much higher unemployment rates.

This leads to the emergence of new characteristics of employment (Standing, 2011; Castel, 2009; Butler, 2004; Bell, 1999) – a new type of business structures are being built, more flexible and innovative, introducing forms of management and work organization that simultaneously lead to an increase in autonomy and an increase in the labor intensity of employees (Bell, 1999; Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999).

The spread of the coronavirus in 2020 has undoubtedly had a serious effect on the global economy. The declaration of a state of emergency and the subsequent measures have greatly changed economic life on a global scale, which has led to the categorical entry of this type of business structures and flexible forms of work.

Online platforms connecting buyers and sellers are increasingly used or large international project teams operating in different time zones are created (Kiss, 2017). Active labor market policies are needed to respond to the changing reality. This need led to the formation of a new economic model – the gig economy (“Gig Economy”), where people have the opportunity for hourly employment.

In the gig economy or freelance economy, workers earn their income or part of it from short-term contracts in which they are paid for individual tasks or work (Brock, 2022). The pay for each individual job usually makes up only a small part of the worker's total income. By combining multiple tasks for different companies, gig economy workers can secure cumulative earnings equal to that of conventional full-time jobs

The business sees the gig economy as an ideal form of work that will gradually replace the far more demanding conditions of the traditional employment contract.

2. Freelancing

A part of the labor market is adapting to the new economic trends. The EU has witnessed a new phenomenon – the rise of independent professionals, often called freelancers. Their appearance represents a major change in the nature and ways of working. This process can no longer be defined simply as working for a large corporation, public sector employer or in the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector. Freelancers, with their different approach to work and different philosophy, have the ability to be flexible and innovative and provide added value to business and the economy.

Hiring employees to perform a specific task on a project is not a new concept.

Freelancing, as it is fashionable to call it, is synonymous with freelance work (Kuzmov, 2021).

Walter Scott first mentioned freelancing in his novel *Ivanhoe*. He describes a medieval mercenary warrior as a free-lance (literally “free lance (spear)” – in the sense that he can be hired). Gradually, the term changed and in the second half of the 19th century it began to be used in the field of journalism in a figurative, rather than a literal, sense as a definition of freelance writing.

Subsequently, at the beginning of the 20th century, productions of the term also appeared. Nowadays, freelance is used as both a verb, an adjective, and a noun, applying to all independent professionals who commit only to work on a specific project and can decide for themselves when, how much and how to work. With the development of Internet technologies, this employment opportunity is becoming more and more real, accessible and preferred.

Freelancers are highly skilled, self-employed individuals who work for themselves, do not employ other employees and range from journalists and designers to IT specialists and consultants. They represent a significant part of the employed – 25% of those working in the craft, scientific and technical spheres and 22% of those engaged in arts and entertainment.

Remote work has become a lifesaver for workers whose companies have kept them stateside during the difficult months of isolation linked to Covid 19. Others, thanks to their skills and knowledge of the sector they work in, have managed relatively easily to adapt to the situation and become freelance professionals.

2.1. Defining Freelancing

Freelancers are virtually invisible in academic literature, and in official statistics they are included either in self-employment data (self-employed persons) or in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) data.

The self-employed group is extremely heterogeneous (McKeow & Leighton, 2015) by its very nature, and this heterogeneity is even more visible when approached cross-nationally.

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2.2. Self-employment in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, as well as in other countries of the United Europe, self-employment is most often associated with the work of sole traders, self-employed persons, agricultural producers, family members working in the household, employers employed under civil contracts for a certain period and others. In addition to the above categories, the term “self-employed” in business practice and in publications is also used for entrepreneurs (and entrepreneurship).

According to the Bulgarian legislation, in § 1, item 29 of the Additional Regulations of the Income Tax, an explanation is given about freelancer and free profession.

When monitoring the workforce, the self-employed are those who define themselves as self-employed persons who, alone or in partnership with other persons, carry out economic activity, work as a freelance (private) practice, work under lease or carry out another activity independently, by not employing other persons. This group covers the self-employed in a narrow sense, which include sole traders without hired workers, persons with free professions and some others (Lukanova, 2010).

Compared to other EU member states, Bulgaria maintains high relative shares of the self-employed in the overall employment structure. According to the latest Eurostat data, nearly 11% of Bulgarians are self-employed. Two-thirds of them are self-employed, and the rest have employees. The largest share of the self-employed by age is those over 65 – nearly 30%. The tendency for self-employed to be more men than women is valid for all

countries. The same is true in Bulgaria, where 17% of all working men work for themselves, and the proportion of women is less than 10%.

According to Lukanova (2010), the largest number of the self-employed in Bulgaria falls in the age group between 35 and 44 years, but the tendency is to increase their number in the higher age groups. This is due to the fact that retirement for the self-employed occurs later than for those employed on an employment contract – after the age of 65, which defines self-employment as a promising form of extending working life.

2.3. Self-employment, self-insurance and the shadow economy

Focusing their attention on the changing economic environment and wage differentials, economists have paid less attention to another profound change in the economy and labor relations: the dramatic decline in long-term employment and the emergence of the gig economy. Shady businesses, relying on a largely transient workforce with few permanent employees, are becoming prominent.

In the economic and social sciences, there is a certain set of problems to which scientists periodically return, finding new aspects for their solvability. One such problem is the study of the unobserved (“shadow”) economy. It forms a significant part of the gross domestic product (GDP) of many countries. Its average value for the largest countries in the world is 30.9% (Medina, Schneider, & Shedding, 2021) of the official GDP, in developing countries it reaches 41.0%, and in developed countries it fluctuates at the level of 18.0% (Schneider & Buehn 2018).

The increased interest in the study of the unobserved economy is, among other things, related to the increase in the number of freelancers as part of the self-employed population. In the context of the spread of digital technologies, their number is constantly increasing. It is predicted that in 10 years, freelancers will make up the majority of the workforce.

In her study “Self-Employment in Bulgaria” Lukanova (2010) writes that more than half of the self-employed in Bulgaria work in the shadow sector of the economy. In 2014, the organization of informal workers claimed that only about 8 percent of the self-employed in Bulgaria work on an employment contract and pay taxes and insurance (in “Duma”, 2014, issue 160).

According to Reznik and Korobkova (2021), the main reasons for the unobserved economy are high taxes and insurance, the imposition of significant costs on enterprises for the minimum wage, the presence of a corruption component in market regulation, the high costs of starting and registering a business, the bureaucratization of official activities, etc.

In Bulgaria, the taxation of the income of the self-employed is well regulated by the texts in the Law on the Income of Individuals. The procedure for submitting a tax return is uniform for all taxable persons and is in accordance with Community law.

Self-employed persons under the Individual Incomes Act (including sole traders) correspond with the group of self-insured persons under the Social Insurance Code (SIC),

art. 4, para. 3. More specifically, these are people who manage companies and people – members of unincorporated companies; those exercising a free profession and/or craft activity; registered agricultural producers and tobacco producers; persons who work without an employment relationship and receive a monthly remuneration equal to or above a minimum wage (after reducing it by the legally recognized expenses, if they are not insured on other grounds in the relevant month); those who work without an employment relationship, who are insured on other grounds during the relevant month, regardless of the amount of remuneration received; persons with employment as sole traders, as well as owners or partners in commercial companies.

2.4. Freelancer burnout is a real possibility

Remote work is becoming more and more popular because it gives everyone the opportunity to develop. A mother on maternity leave, a student who combines work with studies, or a professional who is tired of typical tasks and a stable salary can reach the heights of freelancing.

Probably the most important advantage of freelancing is having a flexible work schedule. The freelancer receives the task and the deadlines for its completion (and sometimes he sets the deadlines himself), but decides himself how many hours to work.

The common perception that a freelancer has a lot of free time is wrong. In fact, freelancers work just as long as office workers, and sometimes even longer.

Although they do not have the mandatory working hours typical of contract jobs, most freelancers work much longer hours. Workers assigned to an employment contract receive remuneration at the end of the month, regardless of the hours actually worked; freelancers can only charge their clients for work actually done. This leads to the incessant demand for productivity giving rise to high levels of stress (Snell, 2020).

An EFIP survey (Leighton, 2013) indicates that 20% of freelancers work more than 46 hours a week, 30% work between 36 and 45 hours a week, 27% work between 26 and 35 hours, 23% work less than 25 hours. Among them, some have several jobs and others do not have enough clients.

Financial pressures, irregular working hours and the inability to switch off from work can have a real impact when not managed properly. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Cary Cooper, Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at MBS Manchester University, says that for the self-employed this is a real problem and can lead to the usual mental disorders – stress, depression and anxiety (Hourant, 2016).

Finding and keeping clients is the main challenge freelancers face.

Ensuring a regular flow of work takes time, and when it does, there is no guarantee that it will continue. It is necessary to maintain a daily work routine, work on several projects at the same time and constantly look for new ones to ensure and maintain a constant flow of work. According to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute (cited by S. Kuzmov in “*Capital*”, 2021, issue 34), in 2021 there were between 140 and 160 million freelancers worldwide, but only between 10 and 30% of them have done work for which they were paid, and only 3% have an income of at least \$1,000.

Peaks and dips in the workload of freelancing do not depend on the type of activity – writer, designer or programmer, and will always be a concomitant factor of this type of employment.

Unrealistic expectations can also be a cause of burnout. Disappointments and difficulties, especially when starting the activity, can cause considerable stress. Freelancers must independently handle contracts, legal cases, accounting, marketing, and other business functions for which they are unprepared. Using professionals for these services can be a significant expense.

Negative mental health consequences can arise from a range of frustrations experienced by freelancers, including lack of regular working hours, job security and time management problems when work is not delivered as agreed (Todorov, 2022).

Freelancers work from home and loneliness is cited as a problem experienced by many. For some of them, the work is connected to a certain organization, but they still report a feeling of isolation, as they are often not integrated in the workplace. Although they meet people and interact with colleagues on a project, they are not part of the company culture. There is a lack of investment in a longer-term relationship, as is the case with permanent employees. The lack of a permanent work team removes the psychological buffer against distress (Recruiting Times, 2017).

Freelancing allows you to set your own schedule so that it is possible to take a day off, but it will not be paid, because in this type of employment there is no paid vacation, and there is no five-day work week with two consecutive days off.

3. Stress and distress. Theories and definitions

The term “stress” (from the English stress – “pressure, tension”) is borrowed from engineering sciences, where this word is used to denote an external force applied to a physical object and causing deformations, i.e. a temporary or permanent change in the structure at the object. In physiology, psychology and medicine, this term is used to denote a wide range of human conditions that arise in response to various extreme impacts. Initially, the concept of stress arose in physiology to denote a non-specific reaction of the body (“general adaptation syndrome”) in response to any adverse impact (Selye, 1950). Later, it began to be used to describe the states of the individual in extreme conditions on a physiological, biochemical, psychological and behavioral level.

Various aspects of stress are the subject of research in psychology, physiology, medicine, sociology and other sciences. Much attention has been paid to the content of this concept, and the most frequently used interpretations will be given in the further exposition. We only note that to this day the concepts of “stress”, “distress”, “tension”, “emotional stress” etc. are not always clearly distinguished in the literature, which makes it even more difficult to study this and without quite a complex problem.

The adaptation reaction of the individual depends on his previous life experience in dealing with similar challenges, as well as on his constitutional features (temperament, dynamic stereotype, etc.)

High, pathogenic levels of stress are summarized by Selye in the term “distress”.

4. Burnout syndrome

The success of the burnout metaphor reflects the concept's origins in general discourse. People have been using this term to describe the experience since before scientific psychology identified it as a phenomenon worth studying.

As a metaphor for the loss of energy, burnout is associated with extinguishing a fire or extinguishing a candle. A fire can only burn brightly if there are enough resources to support it. Thus, employees subjected to continuous stress lose their ability to provide the intense input that sustains the “burning”. From their point of view and that of those around them, they achieve less. In summary, the metaphor describes the depletion of employees' capacity to sustain intense involvement that has a significant impact on their work.

Burnout was mentioned for the first time as a psychological phenomenon that arose in the helping professions (the professions that by their purpose involve activities to provide assistance to people with various problems and needs) by Bradley (1969), who proposed a new organizational structure to counteract 'staff burnout' among probation officers. However, the American psychiatrist Freudenberger is considered the father of the burnout syndrome. In his seminal 1974 publication entitled Staff burn-out, he described the syndrome in great detail, thus beginning its imposition.

The concept was further developed by academic researcher and social psychologist Christina Maslach and her colleagues, and shows that burnout manifests itself as a social problem rather than a scientific construct.

Researchers are adamant that burnout is not a new phenomenon, but more serious scientific attention to it and its recognition as a psychological phenomenon by scientists is due to its rapid spread as a result of social changes in the 1970s . Initially, it was considered only in relation to the representatives of certain professions that work with people, for example, health workers, teachers and law enforcement officers. Previously, the phenomenon of burnout was described with the concepts of “stress”, “depression”, “alienation”, “exhaustion”, “general anxiety”, “neurasthenia” (Tsenova, 1993).

In the eighties, the concept of professional burnout and the term “burnout” replaced the term “stress” in the specialized scientific literature, especially in English-speaking countries.

In the scientific literature, terms such as “professional burnout”, “emotional burnout”, and “mental burnout” are used interchangeably. Using the term “professional burnout”, the researchers emphasize that this syndrome manifests itself in the professional sphere and is associated with the person's attitude to work.

In the Bulgarian scientific literature, the terms “burnout”, “burnout”, “professional burnout”, “burnout”, as well as the “professional burnout syndrome” introduced by Dinkov (2016) are used equally.

Initially, the studies of this phenomenon were mainly descriptive and episodic in nature. Acknowledging the social origins of burnout is essential to understanding the historical development of the concept of burnout.

Arguably, two strands of burnout research have emerged: (1) practical activities related to the treatment of burnout, resulting in the emergence of a veritable “burnout industry” offering seminars, training programs, organizational consulting, and so on; and (2) academic research leading to thousands of scientific publications (1,450,000 according to Google Scholar and over 18,000 according to PsychInfo as of February 2023).

In Bulgaria, the scientific interest in this current scientific and practical problem is also significant. Among the numerous group of scientists studying stress and professional burnout, there are psychologists, psychiatrists, social and organizational workers, management specialists. Among them are Tsenova, B., Rusinova, V., Stoyanov, D., Dicheva, E., Hristova, E., Savova, Z., Ilieva, S., Mircheva, K., Tagareva, K., Dinkov, M., Stamenkova, N., Paunov, M., Prodanov, M., Vitanova, N., Nikolov, N., Valkov, P., Yanakiev I. and many others.

5. Burnout syndrome as diagnose

A formal diagnosis requires the psychological condition to be recognized and listed in the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD) or its American equivalent – Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Burnout was included for the first time in 2015 in the tenth edition of the ICD (ICD-10), which defines burnout briefly as “a state of vital exhaustion”. The definition was expanded in 2018 in the eleventh edition (ICD-11), where burnout is described as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that is not successfully managed. Three descriptive “dimensions” or symptoms are listed:

- Feeling of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distancing from work or manifestation of work-related negativity or cynicism;
- Feeling of ineffectiveness and lack of achievement.

Importantly, both ICD-10 and ICD-11 position burnout as an occupational phenomenon rather than a medical condition. If we refer to ICD-11, burnout in itself is not a disease. In addition, burnout was never included in the DSM.

Thus, the condition is not seen as a formal psychiatric disorder—a position that is consistent with the views of sufferers who see burnout as a “normal” rather than a pathological response to work stressors. The perceived normality of burnout (that it allows people to talk about their experiences quite calmly) compared to other psychological conditions is a striking phenomenon.

Despite its non-clinical status in the ICD-11 and its absence from the DSM, burnout syndrome is accepted as an occupational disease in many countries – Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia and Sweden. It currently ranks among the most commonly diagnosed psychological conditions in these regions, and in at least five of these countries, sufferers can receive paid sick leave and insurance benefits.

This formalized status contrasts with countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, where burnout is not yet recognized as an official diagnosis. As positioned in ICD-11, burnout is seen as related to a formalized work environment and generally reflects a mismatch between workload and available resources.

5.1. Burnout syndrome and its symptoms

To place burnout in a broader societal and cultural context, the scope needs to be broadened to include occupational stress. Occupational stress is a more general term that refers to any affect-laden negative experience caused by an imbalance between the demands of the job and the worker's ability to respond.

When the demands of the work environment are too high, stress reactions are likely to occur in the worker. Burnout is considered a special type of long-term occupational stress that results in particular from the demands of the workplace arising from working with people and the relationships between them.

Traditionally, research on occupational stress has been conducted primarily on those working in industrial settings, thus neglecting the 'human' services, whereas the opposite is true for research on burnout.

Burnout is a specific response to prolonged exposure to work-related stressors and is therefore often studied in stress research. However, burnout is conceptually distinguished from occupational stress on the basis of its specific psychological construct, the cause of its occurrence, and the work-related consequences (Pines & Keinan, 2005).

Maslach and Schaufeli (1993) also confirmed the proposition that occupational strain and burnout are distinct consequences of work-related stress.

Occupational stress is a general term that refers to temporary adaptation in the workplace accompanied by mental and physical symptoms. Burnout is considered a chronic, maladaptive functioning and final stage of breakdown as a result of prolonged occupational stress.

Stress is the initial phase of burnout. Therefore, burnout does not develop without stress, but it is possible for stress to accumulate without burnout.

Stress, by itself, is not a disorder while burnout is.

With the exception of depression, stress is very similar to burnout. It's hard to know where “normal” stress stops and burnout begins.

The intensity of stress is not the same for all individuals, i.e. some become highly stressed because they overreact to stressors, while others have the ability to cope with stressors.

Another important distinction between the constructs of stress and burnout is that burnout is studied as a process rather than a state and involves the development of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors toward service recipients, the job, and the organization (Shirom, 1989; Grunfeld et al. 2000; Grunfeld, Whelan, Zitzelsberger, 2000).

Burnout as a result of occupational stress occurs when a person's adaptive capacity (resources) to overcome a stressful situation is exhausted.

6. Resistance to stress – resilience

The analysis in the scientific literature of the condition of persons who have experienced psychological traumas shows that both the immediate and long-term consequences of their impact are different for different individuals.

Among persons subjected to psychotraumatic effects, people resistant to these effects stand out, but the nature of resistance to psychological stressors is still not fully understood. Generally speaking, the most acceptable view can be considered that resilience to extreme situations implies either a low level of reaction or a high level of restoration of biopsychological resources (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013; Robertson et al., 2015).

The idea of resilience as resistance to stress arose in the 1970s, when researchers began to study children with normal development but with problems in their upbringing (Masten, 2001).

Concepts of resilience to stress have two common elements – distress and positive adaptation (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013) – that should be included in research on resilience in humans and animal models. In fact, most current research on psychological resilience includes four dimensions: (a) baseline, or the time before adversity; (b) the trouble itself; (c) post-disaster resilient outcomes and (d) predictors of resilient outcomes (Bonanno et al., 2015).

Of great importance in matters related to stress tolerance is the study of a person's ability to overcome obstacles (coping behavior). This ability is seen as a stabilizing factor that can help a person create psychosocial adaptation during stressful situations. A number of researchers of the structural components of resilience indicate the presence of positive or negative strategies for dealing with various stressors – the so-called coping strategies.

The term “coping” is derived from the English word “cope” – overcome, fight, struggle. The concept of “coping” was developed in the 1960s based on stress theories (Miteva, 2010).

The results of modern research show that the individual's reactions to extreme factors are determined not only by the nature of external stimulation, but also by the totality of his own psycho-physiological and socio-psychological characteristics.

Depending on the specific stressful process, resilience can be understood as the ability: (1) to maintain natural functions and avoid adversity and (2) for the individual to deal positively with stress and derive some benefit from it. Neurobiological studies show

that resilience is mediated both by the absence of certain key molecules that are found in susceptible animals and reduce their ability to cope, and by the presence of various adaptive mechanisms seen in resilient individuals that promote normal behavior (Krishnan et al., 2007; Friedman et al., 2016). The first and the second are considered as mechanisms of passive and active resistance, respectively (Russo et al., 2012).

6.1. Behavioral characteristics of resilience

A number of psycho-social factors have been identified as contributing to resilience. Factors include active coping (Snow-Turek et al., 1996; Hanton et al., 2013), optimism (Warner et al., 2012), cognitive reappraisal (Maren, 2008; Farchi & Gidron, 2010), prosocial behavior (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008), social support and others (Cai et al., 2017).

Several groups of foreign researchers independently identified a number of psycho-social factors that contribute to the formation of resistance to stress. Among them, the most significant are: active coping (Snow-Turek et al., 1996; Hanton et al., 2013), cognitive reappraisal (Maren, 2008; Farchi and Gidron, 2010; Troy et al., 2010), prosocial behavior (Staub and Vollhardt, 2008), social support and others (Ozbay et al., 2008; Cai et al., 2017).

There are also studies that claim no relationship between resilience and social support, lifestyle factors, or work-related factors (Corina and Adriana, 2013; Black et al., 2017), although -resilience is recognized as a buffer against various types of stress.

6.2. Dynamic framework of resilience

Recently, much attention has been paid to the concept of “dynamic biopsychological homeostasis”, in which resilience to stress is seen as a state of dynamic equilibrium in which physical, psychological and spiritual components, as well as various adverse or protective factors are in dynamic balance phase. In this context, apart from individual personality traits (neuroticism, hyperthymia, extroversion, sense of humor), resistance to stress is also influenced by some other factors – social support, memories of childhood problems, etc. A complex combination of the above factors determines how quickly people recover from stressful events in everyday life (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno & Mancini, 2008). Individual characteristics are manifested in the fact that some people are able to withstand stressful events without losing self-control, while others need some time to restore their initial state. Unstable (stress prone) people experience constant discomfort from exposure to even relatively mild stressful events.

SECOND CHAPTER

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Object and subject of empirical research

Object of the empirical study: freelancers with different areas of professional performance.

Subject of the empirical study: Specifics of the burnout syndrome in freelancers.

The observed specifics are related to:

- Demographic characteristics;
- Professional characteristics;
- Characteristics related to the labor activity of the respondents;
- Emotional burnout, dehumanization and feeling of failure and dissatisfaction with work (reduction of personal achievements).

2. Aim and tasks of empirical research

The aim of the present study is to empirically analyze the correlation between the factors of the work environment among freelancers and the manifestation of burnout syndrome and how this relationship affects the increase of psycho-social risks of professional burnout.

Due to overload when performing their activities, freelancers can accumulate negative effects from experienced functional states, which is accompanied by an increased level of professional distress and, as a result, leads to the development of burnout syndrome.

More specifically, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of manifestation of the syndrome in its three dimensions in the target group?
2. Do socio-demographic factors influence burnout and what is it?
3. Do work/organizational environment factors influence the syndrome?
4. What are the reasons for choosing freelancing as a way of professional expression?
5. Do freelancers in Bulgaria receive social support?
6. How does the Bulgarian freelancer work (online, office, work at home)?

3. Hypotheses of empirical research

The following hypotheses were formulated:

HYPOTHESIS 1. It is assumed that the level of burnout among freelancers given the nature of their work is high.

HYPOTHESIS 2. It is supposed that statistically significant differences will be found in the level of the studied constructs depending on the socio-demographic factors. This gives reason to formulate the following sub-hypotheses:

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.1. It is suggested that the demographic factor gender has an influence on the burnout syndrome, and more precisely, that women are more prone to burnout and have higher levels of emotional exhaustion.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.2. It is supposed that the influence of age on the three manifestations of burnout is positively related to the syndrome, i.e. with increasing age, the level of burnout increases.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.3. Marital status influences the degree of burnout.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.4. The type of professional activity has a statistically significant effect on burnout.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.5. It is assumed that the type of professional employment has a significant influence on professional burnout, and more precisely – that respondents who engage in freelancing as an additional activity are more busy. The additional working hours involved in freelancing as an additional activity are a risk factor and a prerequisite for the manifestation of the syndrome.

HYPOTHESIS 3. It is supposed that a statistically significant influence of work environment factors and the level of burnout will be found.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.1. It is assumed that there is an inverse relationship between poor communication and burnout syndrome.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.2. It is suggested that there is an inverse relationship between deadlines and burnout, i.e. the shorter the deadlines, the greater the stress.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.3. High competition is hypothesized to be associated with high levels of burnout.

Regarding the reward factor, the research is interested in non-security. In this regard, the following sub-hypothesis is formulated, namely:

SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.4. It is supposed that there is a direct relationship between compensation and the level of burnout. The more uncertain the monthly income, the higher the level of burnout.

SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.5. It is assumed that there is a direct relationship between the demand for creativity and the level of professional burnout.

4. Organization and research methods

In accordance with the set tasks, the theoretical research was conducted in two stages:

1. Analysis of the literature on the topic of the study.
2. Statement of the problem, formulation of hypotheses, objectives of the research, selection of objects for research.

The empirical study was conducted in the period 2020-2022 and includes four phases:

1. Conduct testing

A test diagnosis of freelancers was carried out using the following tools:

- Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach & Jackson (1986) (Appendix 1).
- Author's questionnaire based on the example of the questionnaire for the study of demographic factors, factors of the professional, family and social environment on the manifestation of burnout syndrome among pedagogical specialists (Yanakiyev, 2019) (Appendix 2).

A psycho-semantic structure of the items in the questionnaire is organized around several semantic cores: finding projects, stressors related to remuneration, stressors in work organization, stressors in working with clients, personal qualities and social support, reasons for choosing freelancing as professional employment.

2. Mathematical and statistical data processing

Processing of the results and statistical analysis of the data were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics 19.0. and AMOS 26 Descriptive statistics, variance analysis, t-test, correlation analysis and structural analysis – structural equation modeling were performed. Psychometric characteristics of the questionnaires were derived (including Cronbach's Alpha and Pearson's coefficient). The Microsoft Office Excel 2010 software package was used to create the graphs.

3. Discussion and interpretation of results

This stage represents the most essential step and includes checking the formulated hypotheses, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained results and, on this basis, drawing some more significant generalizations and conclusions from the conducted research.

4. Proposing an approach for the prevention and therapy of the burnout syndrome

Approaches and models in counseling and therapeutic work are presented. The obverse is attention to 'mindfulness' as a practice and its relation to the concepts of transactional analysis

5. Respondents

Subjects were randomly selected in a profiled online platform by filling in a google doc form. The survey was completed by 1,231 people between the ages of 20 and 56, of whom 48 were dropped from the analysis due to incomplete survey forms. The number of persons surveyed covers a representative sample of 1183 freelancers. Table 10 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Таблица 10. *Socio-demographic characteristics of the examined persons*

| Socio-demographic characteristics | | No. | % |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Age group | Up to 20 years. | 22 | 1.9 |
| | 21 – 30 years. | 446 | 37.7 |
| | 31 – 40 years. | 380 | 32.1 |
| | 41 – 50 years. | 244 | 20.6 |
| | Over 50 years. | 91 | 7.7 |
| | Total: | 1183 | 100 |
| Profession/occupation | IT sector | 122 | 10.3 |
| | Graphic, fashion, web design | 64 | 5.4 |
| | Administrative activity | 73 | 6.2 |
| | Finance and accounting | 125 | 10.6 |
| | Marketing and Advertising | 112 | 9.5 |
| | Education | 122 | 10.3 |
| | Human Resources (HR) | 43 | 3.6 |
| | Medicine | 133 | 11.2 |
| | Engineering and construction activity | 57 | 4.8 |
| | Right | 48 | 4.1 |
| | Commerce | 58 | 4.9 |
| | Journalistic and translation services | 66 | 5.6 |
| | Art | 53 | 4.5 |
| | Consulting services | 53 | 4.5 |
| Hairdressing and cosmetics | 54 | 4.6 | |
| Gender | man | 594 | 50.2 |
| | woman | 589 | 49.7 |
| Residence | Sofia | 665 | 56.2 |
| | Plovdiv | 100 | 8.4 |
| | Varna | 72 | 6.1 |
| | Burgas | 34 | 2.9 |
| | Smaller cities in Bulgaria | 256 | 21.6 |
| | A foreign country | 51 | 4.3 |
| Marital status | Cohabitation on a family basis | 504 | 42.6 |
| | Single | 137 | 11.6 |
| | Family | 101 | 8.5 |
| | Divorced | 441 | 37.3 |
| TOTAL: | | 1183 | 100 |

CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. Analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Descriptive statistics

1.1. Gender

The population investigated in this dissertation study contains an approximately equal number of respondents in terms of the socio-demographic factor gender – 49.79% women and 51.21% men.

1.2. Age

The age range of the study participants was between 20 and 56 years. The average age of the study participants was 35 years.

1.3. Residence

The factor “Residence” was specified only for general, additional information related to the nature of the sample. This factor was not included in the analysis due to irrelevance. One of the main characteristics of freelancing is that there is virtually no workplace – freelancers work from anywhere.

1.4. Marital status

Almost half of the surveyed persons (42.6%) have a de facto cohabitation (live on a family basis) with their partner. 11.58% of respondents indicated that they were single, 8.54% answered that they were married, and 37.28% indicated that they were “divorced”.

“Widow” responses were missing, so this status was excluded from representation.

1.5. Field of professional occupation

The largest percentage of persons (11.24%) indicated that they work in the field of medicine. The next category, in which a significant part of the respondents fall, is finance and accounting (10.57%), followed by IT specialists and teachers (10.31% each). 9.47% work in marketing and advertising, 5.58% work in translation and writing texts, 5.41% work in design (fashion and web). Less than 5% of respondents fall into the other distinct groups.

1.6. Employment

The distribution of respondents depending on whether freelance work is their main or additional activity is relatively equal. Just over half of respondents (53%) work full-time as freelancers, and 47% use this opportunity for additional income.

2. Analysis of the results of the Maslach Burnout Inventory

This point aims to present the structure of the self-assessment scale and (2.1.) the psychometric characteristics of the questionnaire. First of all, reliability is established (2.1.1.) according to Cronbach's Alpha coefficient.

In terms of internal consistency in the present study, Cronbach's Alpha for the entire questionnaire was equal to 0.70, indicating excellent reliability of the scale. Regarding the subscales, the calculated coefficients of internal consistency are as follows: EE: $\alpha=0.78$, DP: $\alpha = 0.70$, RLP: $\alpha = 0.77$.

This point also includes (2.1.2.) descriptive statistics, and the analysis of the results presents frequency distributions of the raw scores, histograms and basic statistics for the entire scale and each subscale, as well as (2.3.1.) item statistics – the means and standard deviations of each item.

3. Diagnosis of professional burnout

The paragraph focuses on the measurement and analysis of the level of occupational burnout. To determine the existence of a relationship between each of the subscales of the burnout syndrome self-assessment questionnaire, a correlation analysis was performed using the Pearson correlation coefficient, which showed that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homogeneity were not violated. An analysis of the influence of socio-demographic factors on the levels of the studied constructs was made through one-factor variance analysis, correlation analysis and t-test (3.1.). The independent factors were examined sequentially: gender (3.1.1.), age (3.1.2.), place of work (3.1.3.), marital status (3.1.4.), professional direction (3.1.5.), type of work employment (3.1.6.).

The influence of work environment factors is discussed in (3.2.). A one-factor variance analysis was conducted, the central tendency of the factors of the working environment, or the so-called average values of the distribution, represented by the mode, median and arithmetic mean indices, was presented.

To determine the influence of the factors regarding professional burnout, a statistical analysis was made using the Pearson correlation coefficient (3.2.1.). This analysis allows us to estimate bivariate relationships in the interrelationships between the constructs under study. The results of both analyzes are shown in Table 47.

A more complex model – confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling – including both burnout dimensions and work environment variables was tested to assess impact. Through these analyses, the metric aspects of the questionnaire were verified in terms of content, construct validity and reliability (Muñiz, 2010, Lee & Cagle, 2017). The data showed that the model fit indices were acceptable and the model used was adequate (Table 48 and Figure 49).

Table 47. Correlation analysis

| Correlation between | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|---|-------|---------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|------|
| 1. Emotional exhaustion | 1 | .495*** | -.151* | -.295* | .009 | -.034 | -.079 | .181* | .031 | .051 | .014 | .032 |
| 2. Depersonalization | 1 | .076 | -.084 | -.044 | -.011 | -.178** | -.025 | .028 | -.066 | -.065 | .035 | |
| 3. The uncertain monthly income | 1 | -.288* | .178** | .073 | .201** | .289** | -.175** | .070 | -.175** | .112 | -.180** | |
| 4. Short deadlines for implementation | 1 | -.007 | .113* | .062 | -.124* | .002 | .091 | .046 | -.024 | | | |
| 5. The requirement for creativity/ originality and innovation | 1 | -.002 | -.080 | .037 | .007 | .049 | .280** | -.075 | | | | |
| 6. Offering lower (attractive) prices | 1 | .197** | .044 | .062 | -.057 | .031 | -.124* | | | | | |
| 7. Poor communication with customers | 1 | .045 | -.033 | -.015 | -.105 | | | | | | | |
| 8. The great competition | 1 | .076 | -.123* | .012 | -.131* | | | | | | | |
| 9. The lack of opportunity for a vacation | 1 | .261** | .071 | -.127* | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Not enough time for family and yourself | 1 | .118* | -.113* | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Lack of working hours and workplace | 1 | -.005 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Other | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Mean (\bar{x}) | 19.40 | 18.01 | 1.49 | 1.70 | 1.91 | 1.78 | 1.84 | 1.76 | 1.78 | 1.64 | 1.87 | 1.95 |
| Std. Deviation | 4.213 | 4.365 | .501 | .457 | .290 | .413 | .371 | .426 | .417 | .479 | .339 | .224 |

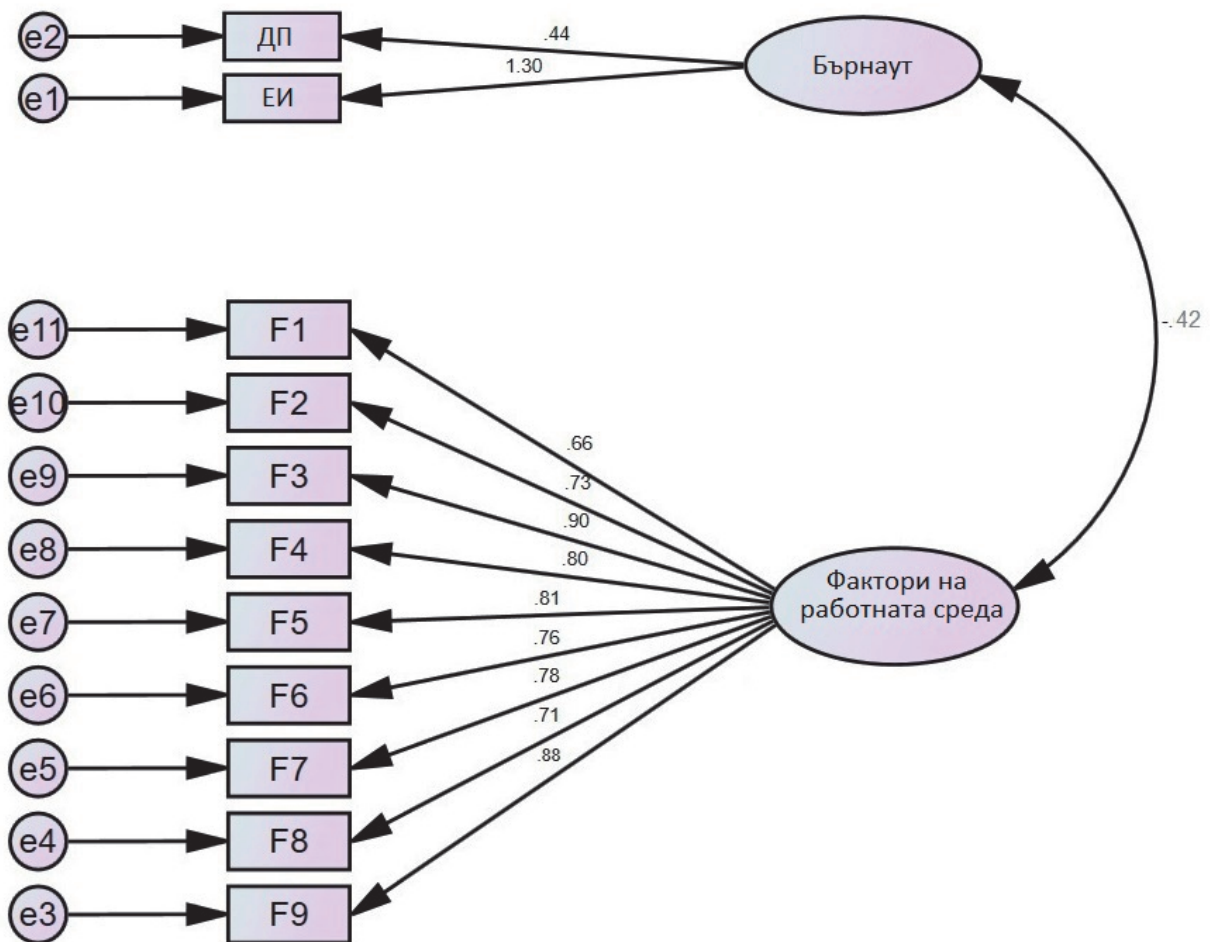
Note: The data were analyzed with the Pearson linear correlation coefficient; the correlation is statistically significant: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 48. *Conformity indices for the resulting model.*

| Measure | Good fit | Acceptable fit | Obtained values |
|----------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| χ^2 | | | 476.1 |
| df | | | 43 |
| P | | | 0.000 |
| RMSEA | 0 < RMSEA < 0.05 | 0.05 < RMSEA < 0.08 | 0.082 |
| NFI | 0.95 < NFI < 1.00 | 0.90 < NFI < 0.95 | 0.942 |
| CFI | 0.97 < CFI < 1.00 | 0.95 < CFI < 0.97 | 0.947 |
| GFI | 0.95 < GFI < 1.00 | 0.90 < GFI < 0.95 | 0.929 |
| AGFI | 0.90 < AGFI < 1.00 | 0.85 < AGFI < 0.90 | 0.891 |

RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; NFI – normal fit index; CFI – comparative fit index; GFI – compliance index; and AGFi – adjusted fit index (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

Figure 49. *A structural equation model*



In paragraph 3.3. Personal factors addressed the commitment to work on more than one project, often leading to burnout. Making commitments is related to an individual assessment of the factual situation and making a personal decision. Descriptive statistics related to the amount of work were done. Taking on a large number of projects was reported by 46.71% of the respondents, 26.02% of them focus on quality implementation and balance the amount of work, and for 27.27% this is exhausting and they rarely exceed their capabilities.

Support related to the mode of operation is discussed in (3.4.). The majority of the participants in the study shared that they receive understanding from relatives and friends regarding their work. They are not engaged in side tasks because they work from home.

The reasons for choosing freelancing as a way of work performance are discussed in (3.5.). For 22.8% of the respondents, the reason is the great independence. 18.1% indicate an opportunity to apply creativity, and 15.91% also note most of their free time. 15.0% cited additional income as a reason, and 11.18% cited financial independence. The possibility of unlimited professional development is noted as an advantage by 14.41% of the participants.

4. Discussion, conclusions and summaries

A total of 1,183 people took part in the study, dedicated to professional burnout in the free professions, of which 49.79% were women.

The results of the dissertation study showed that 21.3% (N = 252) of women and 19.61% (N = 232) of men scored high levels on the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale. The difference in percentages was insignificant – 1.69% (N = 20). Descriptive statistics and subsequent independent samples t-test analysis indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean values for males ($\bar{x} = 2.13$, SD = 0.793) and females ($\bar{x} = 2.20$, SD = 0.787) : $t_{1182} = -1.392$, $p = 0.164$. The difference in arithmetic means (M = -0.064, CI₉₅ = -0.154, 0.026) was smaller than the typical effect size $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

The summary of the data on the “Depersonalization” scale shows high levels for 13.19% of women and 13.1% of men. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests showed no statistically significant difference between the mean values for men ($\bar{x} = 1.87$, SD = 0.796) and women ($\bar{x} = 1.89$, SD = 0.793): $t_{1182} = -0.344$, $p = 0.731$.

The difference in arithmetic mean values (M = -0.016, CI₉₅ = -0.107, 0.075) was smaller than the typical effect size $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

On the third scale – “Reduction of personal achievements”, low values prevail for 38.04% of women and 39.39% of men, or a total of 77.43%. Here, too, no statistically significant difference was observed between the arithmetic mean values for men ($\bar{x} = 1.96$, SD = 0.795) and women ($\bar{x} = 2.01$, SD = 0.768): $t_{1182} = -0.344$, $p = 0.731$. The the difference in arithmetic mean values (M = -0.052, CI₉₅ = -0.141, 0.037) was smaller than the typical effect size $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

On this basis, it can be concluded that HYPOTHESIS 1. – “It is assumed that the level of burnout among freelancers given the nature of their work is high”, was confirmed.

The study did not confirm SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.1. – that gender has an effect, and more precisely – that women are more prone to burnout and have higher levels of burnout. The data showed no statistically significant difference between the arithmetic means for men ($\bar{x} = 2.13$, $SD = 0.793$) and women ($\bar{x} = 2.20$, $SD = 0.787$): $t_{1182} = -1.392$, $p = 0.164$ for the Emotional Exhaustion scale. The difference in arithmetic means ($M = -0.064$, $CI_{95} = -0.154, 0.026$) was smaller than the typical effect size of $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

For the Depersonalization scale, there was also no statistically significant difference between the mean values for men ($\bar{x} = 1.87$, $SD = 0.796$) and women ($\bar{x} = 1.89$, $SD = 0.793$): $t_{1182} = -0.344$, $p = 0.731$. The difference in arithmetic means ($M = -0.016$, $CI_{95} = -0.107, 0.075$) was less than the typical $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988). The analysis showed similar results on the “Reduction of personal achievements” scale. There is no statistically significant difference between the arithmetic mean values for men ($\bar{x} = 1.96$, $SD = 0.795$) and women ($\bar{x} = 2.01$, $SD = 0.768$): $t_{1182} = -0.344$, $p = 0.731$. The difference in arithmetic means ($M = -0.052$, $CI_{95} = -0.141, 0.037$) was smaller than the typical effect size of $d < 0.20$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.2 was raised regarding the age factor, and more specifically: “It is assumed that the influence of age on the three manifestations of burnout is negatively related, i.e. with increasing age, the level of burnout decreases”.

The series of t-tests confirmed that on the EE scale ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$) there is a statistically significant difference between the arithmetic mean values for the group 21-30 years old ($\bar{x} = 2.29$, $SD = 0.754$) and 31 – 40 years old ($\bar{x} = 2.11$, $SD = 0.810$): $t_{1182} = 3.287$, $p = 0.001$. The magnitude of the difference in group means ($M = 0.179$, $CI_{95} = 0.072, 0.286$) was smaller than the typical effect size $d = 0.23$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

For the remaining two scales – “Depersonalization” and “Reduction of personal achievements”, the hypothesis was not confirmed, since the standard deviation $p > 0.05$ does not give reason to conclude that there is a difference between the two arithmetic mean values.

Correlation analysis between the constructs “emotional exhaustion” and “age” showed that all points on the scatter plot lie close to a straight line having a negative slope. There is a linear negative correlation ($r = -0.129$), which represents the functional dependence between the two variables. This confirms the assumption that the manifestation of burnout decreases with age. SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.2. was partially confirmed. Despite the lack of statistically significant influence between the constructs, the relationship between them is negative.

The analysis of the results partially confirms SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.3. – marital status has an impact on the degree of professional burnout.

The results showed significance of the influence for some of the factors only on the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale. These are the family statuses “Starting a family” ($\bar{x} = 2.17$, $SD = 0.783$) and “Single” ($\bar{x} = 2.36$, $SD = 0.775$): $t_{1182} = 2.444$, $p = 0.015$. The difference in arithmetic mean values ($M = -0.183$, $CI_{95} = -0.330, -0.035$) was smaller than the typical effect size $d = 0.24$ according to Cohen (Cohen, 1988).

For the other two scales – DP and RPA, the standard deviation $p > 0.05$ which showed no difference between the two arithmetic mean values.

The data confirmed SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.4. For the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale, the influence of the professional sphere factor was significant, with an effect size small or smaller than the typical $\eta = 0.15$, according to the interpretation made by Cohen (Cohen, 1988). This factor was also statistically significant for the other two scales: $F(14.116) = 3.57$, $p < 0.001$ for the “Depersonalization” scale with an effect size of $\eta = 0.2$ – medium or typical according to Cohen, and $F(14.116) = 3.08$, $p < 0.001$ with a small or smaller than typical effect size $\eta = 0.19$ according to the interpretation made by Cohen.

The results of the present study showed a statistically significant difference on the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale when freelancing as a main activity ($\bar{x} = 2.22$, $SD = 0.764$) and an additional activity ($\bar{x} = 2.10$, $SD = 0.815$): $t_{1182} = 2.704$, $p = 0.007$. The difference in arithmetic means ($M = 0.120$, $CI_{95} = 0.034, 0.214$) was small or smaller than the typical effect size $d = 0.16$ according to Cohen.

According to the “Depersonalization” scale, a difference was noted in arithmetic mean values of free practice as the main activity ($\bar{x} = 1.936$, $SD = 0.782$) and free practice as an additional activity ($\bar{x} = 1.820$, $SD = 0.803$): $t_{1182} = 2.514$, $p = 0.012$ with size ($M = 0.116$, $CI_{95} = 0.025, 0.206$) – small or less than the typical Cohen's $d = 0.15$.

The scale “Reduction of personal achievements” also noted a statistically significant difference in the arithmetic mean values for freelancing as a main activity ($\bar{x} = 1.674$, $SD = 0.775$) and for freelancing as an additional activity ($\bar{x} = 1.545$, $SD = 0.723$): $t_{1182} = 2.965$, $p = 0.003$. The difference ($M = 0.130$, $CI_{95} = 0.044, 0.215$) was small or less than the typical effect size $d = 0.15$ according to Cohen.

This partially confirmed the formulated SUBHYPOTHESIS 2.5. The results show that according to the “Emotional Exhaustion” scale, 22.74% of respondents engaged in freelancing as their main activity have high burnout values, while the percentage of respondents with additional income from freelancing and high burnout values was 18.17%.

The result was similar on the other two scales. For “Depersonalization”, 14.62% of those engaged in freelancing as their main activity and 11.67% – of those engaged in freelancing as an additional activity have high values. The results for the high levels on the scale “Reduction of personal achievements” are distinctly low – 1.86 for freelancing as the main activity and 1.27% for freelancing as an additional activity.

The overall analysis of the selected socio-demographic factors partially confirmed HYPOTHESIS 2.

To determine the influence of work environment factors on the level of occupational burnout, an analysis using the Pearson correlation coefficient was performed. A statistically significant linear correlation was found between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with a large or larger than typical effect size of $r(1138) = 0.495$, $p < 0.01$.

The results noted an influence of the factor “Poor communication with customers” on depersonalization. The correlation was negative, with a small or smaller than typical effect size $r(1138) = -0.178$, $p < 0.01$. The results so far partially prove SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.1.

According to the results of the research, the short execution times marked a statistically significant dependence on the high competition $r(1138) = -0.124$, $p < 0.05$. The correlation was negative, which means that the greater the competition, the less the opportunity to offer adequate delivery times. This result partially proves SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.2. The effect size, although small, is statistically significant. High competition interacted with a small effect size on emotional exhaustion $r(1138) = 0.181$, $p < 0.01$ and insufficient time for family and self $r(1138) = -0.123$, $p < 0.05$. These results partially confirmed SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.3.

The results of the analysis partially proved SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.4. $r(1138) = -0.151$, $p < 0.05$, with a small effect size.

In the studied group, no correlation was found between the factor “Requirement for creativity” and the two dimensions of professional burnout. SUBHYPOTHESIS 3.5. was not confirmed.

In the analysis of the results, a wide network of interrelationships between the investigated factors of the work environment was established. Although not all of them correlated with the studied manifestations of burnout, they noted an interrelationship with each other with a statistically significant effect size. This gave reason to assume that there is an indirect, cumulative influence of environmental factors on the manifestation of the syndrome, and the total magnitude of the effect of the impact can be characterized as much larger than typical.

A confirmatory factor analysis using structural equation modeling was conducted to test this claim. In this way, the metric aspects of the questionnaire were also checked in terms of content, construct validity and reliability (Lopez et al, 2014, 2010, Lee & Cagle, 2017, Quintana & Maxwell, 1999, Yusuf et al. 2023).

The model showed a good fit to the data. The values of the factor weights varied between 0.66 and 0.90, which allows to conclude that the studied factors of the work environment have an impact on burnout in the studied group of freelancers. What has been stated so far gives reason to conclude that HYPOTHESIS 3.

5. Approaches to the prevention and therapy of the burnout syndrome

The main preventive measure against professional personality distortions should involve fostering continuous creativity in one's work, expanding opportunities for professional expression, and diversifying one's social circle.

If signs of burnout have already emerged, individuals should seek support from a psychologist or psychotherapist. These professionals can help identify the causes of the condition, determine the stage of burnout, provide recommendations, and assist in improving the situation (Akindinova, 2008).

Strategies to address burnout include various forms of psychotherapeutic intervention. Each therapist employs different techniques to address emotional well-being.

Psychotherapy plays a pivotal role in addressing issues related to professional burnout. It is essential to first identify and address the underlying causes of burnout (rational psychotherapy).

In more severe cases that may lead to life-threatening conditions, the assistance of a psychiatrist may be necessary, as they can prescribe medication (antidepressants). Collaborative efforts involving competent specialists are crucial in helping the patient (Sidorov, 2005).

5.1. Approaches and models in counseling and therapeutic work

Approaches and models in counseling and therapeutic work are diverse as opportunities for diagnosing and treating the syndrome. One of the theories that has effectively improved human relationships is the theory of transactional analysis (TA). This psychological and advisory direction is essentially an analysis of interactions between people, breaking interactions into small units – transactions (Levkova, 2019).

Numerous studies demonstrate the effectiveness of transactional analysis in overcoming emotional breakdown (Greenberg, 2001), the state of personality, self-esteem, and clinical symptoms of people experiencing emotional breakdown (Goodstein & Lanyon, 2005), reducing marital conflicts (Carver, Vunger, & Derry, 2003), marital satisfaction (Khaliati, 1997), as well as reducing and coping with stress and burnout (Graham & Cockriel, 2004; Johnson, 2015).

There is a subtle difference between counseling and psychotherapy, although they are often conflated as areas of psychological support. According to Levko, counseling is when the client has an internal resource for solving the problem, and the counseling meeting is a process of interaction between the psychologist and the client, the purpose of which is to solve a problem “through a set of knowledge, test methods and other tools” (Levkova, 2019, p. 113).

Transactional analysis is one of the most significant theories in modern psychology. It was proposed by Eric Berne and is widely used in the constructs of parenting, adulthood, childhood, in clinical, therapeutic, and organizational issues, and in the psychology of growth, communication, management, personality, relationships, and behavior (Falsafi, 1993).

5.2. Mindfulness in relation to transactional analysis concepts

Mindfulness does not have an exact, unambiguous and specific translated equivalent in Bulgarian, but it is an extremely popular term worldwide and its popularity is growing more and more in the circles of modern psychology.

The term mindfulness can be explained in many ways, such as: clear mind, concentration, focused mind or mind power. But whatever definition we choose, everything suggests that the mind is fully aware of what is happening around us, of what we do and of the space through which we move.

Regardless of how far our thoughts wander, the mindfulness skill helps us to come back to where we are at the moment, to be aware of what we are doing and feeling at that time.

indfulness is characterized by a stable, non-reactive awareness of the here and now.

Mindfulness interventions have been shown to reduce stress and improve quality of life (Nyklícek & Kuijpers, 2008; Rosenzweig, Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Hojat, 2003; Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005).

Žvelc, Èernetiè, & Košak (2011) developed a psychoeducational program based on the integration of mindfulness and transactional analysis (MBTA) that helps to develop the capacity for awareness and to understand how to implement this capacity in transactional analysis . MBTA is used to reduce stress and also as an adjunct to counseling, psychotherapy, or therapist training.

The prevention and management of burnout syndrome is an important and current task. It is related to “activating the adaptive mechanisms of the personality, which enable the person to work efficiently, to be mentally healthy and to develop fully” (Tagareva, 2013, p. 128).

CONCLUSION

With its scientific design, the dissertation research sheds light on a problem that is currently very little researched – professional burnout among freelancers.

Changes in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, in recent decades, place increasingly high demands on the participants in labor activity, their intellectual and professional level, the development of abilities and talents, as well as personal characteristics.

Business seems to focus mainly on economic results, thus losing sight of the importance of the human aspect of work and the valorization of human resources. Understanding the factors influencing burnout is important for caring for individual psychosocial well-being and organizational effectiveness. A major source of burnout is workload, which suggests that workers feel overwhelmed, along with the reduction of time and resources to adequately perform the relevant occupational tasks.

The dissertation traces several axes of meaning, which are related to the requirements of the work environment of freelancing, the manifestation of burnout and the possibility of prevention. The theoretical analysis of the literature on the chosen topic reveals its continuing relevance. Different models are presented that describe the structure of professional burnout and reveal specifics in the way of working as a freelancer.

The results reveal the influence of external factors on professional burnout and shed light on the causes of distress in freelance practice. Information is presented regarding the possibilities of psychological counseling in the struggle to manage stress, to maintain good levels of work performance and mental well-being.

Regardless of the clarification of the leading stressors in individual cases, it is crucial to recognize the first symptoms and actively seek adequate help. It is therefore necessary to publish and promote accessible short guides for employers and employees.

Implementing effective wellness practices in the workplace can do more. To be effective, these practices must be at the organizational level, reduce workplace stress, promote employee well-being, and increase employee engagement (Peart, 2021; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2021).

However, it is not possible for the same conditions to lead to the same result in different people, with different emotional, physical and mental stress.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study has some limitations. The questionnaire was completed online only by freelancers with access to a profiled platform. This may limit the generalizability of the results.

Another limitation is that the study involved a cross-sectional type of design, which does not allow to examine the causal effect of the relationship between the variables. One of the disadvantages of the cross-sectional analysis is that when it is applied, it is not possible to separate the short-term effect due to random effects or those of shorter duration (Sugarev, Rusev, 2008). As a result, it is possible to draw conclusions that are not entirely correct, especially when estimates of the prospective development of the general population are to be obtained (Preston, Heuveline, Guillot, 2001).

This effect would be better analyzed through longitudinal studies, which would add more to the sequential process of burnout based on the model tested in the current study.

Longitudinal analysis has the property of eliminating the perishable and short-term in the development of processes, but in order to observe a given phenomenon/phenomena, a very long period of time is required and the obtained data refer to a past period, often with very different characteristics from those for the present and even more so for future periods (Kaloyanov, 2011).

CONTRIBUTIONS

1. This study adds to the scientific knowledge of distress by studying professional burnout in freelancers. This is a significant contribution, as this target group is still poorly researched.
2. Based on an in-depth study, a questionnaire related to the factors of the working environment among freelancers was developed. Metric aspects were examined in terms of content, construct validity, and reliability.
3. Manifestations of perceived stress and burnout syndrome are differentiated, as well as techniques for managing stress symptoms.
4. The influence of demographic factors and work environment factors on perceived distress and burnout syndrome was established.
5. The existing interrelationships between the studied constructs are deduced and statistically substantiated.

PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

1. Medneva, T. (2020). Burnout syndrome in freelancers: factors and diagnosis of occupational distress, *Developmental Psychology* (3), p. 90; ISSN 1313-759X
2. Medneva, T. Stoilova, T, (2022), Influence of professional burnout on the communicative competence of administrative employees, *Scientific magazine for doctoral students, "Paisiy Hilendarski" University Publishing House*, issue 6, pp. 5-15; ISSN 2367-7309
3. Medneva T., Medneva S. (2022). The burnout syndrome – a relationship between its three dimensions and the subjective feeling of loneliness among students, *Mental well-being and development of strengths throughout the life cycle, Paisii Hilendarski University Publishing House*, part 2 p. 50; ISBN 978-619-7663-38-9
4. Medneva T. (2022). Counseling in the transactional analysis of professional burnout, *Mental well-being and development of strengths across the life cycle, Paisii Hilendarski University Press*, part 2 p. 71; ISBN 978-619-7663-38-9
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