HOW ENTREPRENEURS BURNOUT?
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING ENTREPRENEURSHIP BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

Most entrepreneurs are too involved in their work, and neglect the importance of health as a primary source of business performance. This research adopts a qualitative narrative approach to investigate entrepreneurs' burnout in the Tunisian context. The dimensionality of Maslach's (1981) three aspects of job burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) were used to collect data among a sample of twelve entrepreneurs and divided into two groups based on two main criteria of burnout. Data analysis showed that the feeling of burnout differed from one entrepreneur to another taking into account factors related to the external environment and factors related to the characteristics of the leader. For better understanding the burnout process two conceptual models for these two groups are proposed.

Keywords: burnout, entrepreneurial burnout, Maslach's model, narrative approach.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, much academic *research* on burnout has *focused* on the understanding, anticipating and assessing its stakes in a specific working environment including the health sector (Maslach, 1981, 1993; Maslach et al 2001; Lewin and Sager, 2007). Previous studies generally have been reviewed the job stressors.

Related literature on job burnout can largely be found, however the concept of 'burnout' is not well-defined, and very little research has been conducted to analyse and understand the extent of

the problem and the impact on the long-term health and wellbeing of the entrepreneur in an entrepreneurial environment (Serin and Balkan, 2014).

Also, studies reported have shown that entrepreneurs do not seem to be saved from this syndrome. (Ben Tahar, 2011).

Marked by an exceptional personality, autonomy, perseverance, a willingness to change, persuasion and success, heads of enterprises, artisans and traders are among the most exposed entrepreneurs to this phenomenon (Cocker et al, 2012).

The burnout or professional exhaustion syndrome affects more and more entrepreneurs around the world and the lack of awareness of it can lead the entrepreneur to question his commitment to the entrepreneurial career (Sheehan and St John, 2014).

In Tunisia, social, political and economic tensions that characterize the environment especially after the revolution of January 2011 have influenced the entrepreneurs and managers of small and medium business at a financial, organizational, social and more particularly at psychological level. The rate of business creation has declined quite rapidly having undesirable consequences of unemployment, inflation and regional disparities (Hannachi and Chabaud, 2013).

While previous research has shown that the causes and consequences of burnout are similar in all people in business, some causes seem to be specific to entrepreneurs. (Wincent et al, 2008; Wincent and Ortqvist, 2009; Shepherd et al, 2010 and Cocker et al, 2012).

Taking into account the work of Maslach et al (1981), this research has laid emphasis on the conceptualization of the dimensions of this feeling. Three dimensions were identified: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Golembiewski and al, 1990; Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Sheperd et al, 2010).

In this research, we adopt this classification, notably the sequential model of Maslach (1981), as the basis of the analysis and the discussion of results.

Also, existing studies on entrepreneurial burnout viewed entrepreneurs as a single class without regard to differences among the members of this group. (David Sheperd and al, 2010; Ben Tahar, 2011; Lavrenčič and Bukovec, 2014). In this research, two main factors of burnout are considered: Personal skills and the degree of dependence on the external environment. This distinction has been used in previous research to primarily identify its causes and consequences (Mohren and al, 2003; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). But it has never been used to better understand the characteristics of the feeling in each dimension of burnout. Hence the central question of our research is:

How can the feeling of burnout be explained among these different types of Tunisian entrepreneurs taking into account factors related to the external environment and factors related to the characteristics of the entrepreneur?

The main objective of this research therefore is to study the entrepreneurial burnout phenomenon taking into account both factors.

This research is justified by the fact that little conceptual or empirical research focuses on the phenomenon of burnout in the entrepreneurial context (David Sheperd and al, 2010) and the negative influence of this symptom on good corporate governance and the inter and intra personal relationship of the entrepreneur with his environment. A greater degree of adjustment or congruence between the variables of the environment, the structure of the strategy, processes and resources and capacity mean greater business performance (Brigham and De Castro, 2003). The health of the company cannot be maintained if the leader of the enterprise is exhausted and unable to concentrate on his job.

This research is divided into three parts:

The first part offers an analysis of the literature on the phenomenon of entrepreneurial burnout to illuminate these different dimensions and its evolving nature. The second part deals with the methodological aspects of our exploratory study. The final part is devoted to the analysis and discussion of our findings.

2. THE BURNOUT: DEFINITION AND DIMENSION

2.1. Definition:

The term burnout was conceptualized for the first time by the American psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger in 1975, who is considered as the founder of this concept. Freudenberger used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals experienced by people working in "helping" professions or professions that need high degree of people contact.

The latter defines it as "failing, wearing out, becoming exhausted by excessive demands on energy and strength or resources". Therefore, burnout is a kind of psychological fatigue that affects individuals exposed to constant pressure and negative stress in the workplace (Lavrenčič, 2014).

So, Burnout can be viewed as a psychological and physical disorder that negatively affects an individual whatever his field of activity is and generates a feeling of disengagement and exhaustion in his job.

Despite the large number of definitions offered by scholars, until now, there is no consensus unifying research on the concept of burnout (Edwards and al, 2000). This is why the researchers focused on the theoretical perspective of Maslach et al. (1981) in which the term burnout is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind".

2.2. Dimensions of burnout according to Maslach model (1981):

Maslach et Jackson (1981) defined three key steps in explaining the burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of professional accomplishment. Each of the three steps described above is characterized by certain signs and symptoms

Emotional Exhaustion (Stress)

Emotional exhaustion is the first step of the burnout process. It represents the stress dimension of burnout and can be emotional, mental or physical. According to Maslach (1982, p.118) "Emotional exhaustion implies that, the feelings of being emotionally forced to the limits and exhausted experienced by individuals during or after their working hours. In the initial stage emotional exhaustion is considered to be the most important of the three components (Maslach and al, 2001). Generally, people affected by burnout feel drained and exhausted at work, deprived morally and physically with a remarkable lack of concentration and productivity.

Depersonalization (cynicism)

The second step of the burnout definition process by Maslach is depersonalization. It is the representation of the interpersonal dimension of burnout. It is a psychological state propelled by a sense of emotional disengagement in the relationship with the other and the absence of the spirit of teamwork with unfriendly behaviors towards each other. Depersonalization or cynicism is characterized as negative cynical callous attitudes towards clients, colleagues and / or managers (E.Lewin et K.Sager, 2007). The main causes of these hostile behaviors are emotional exhaustion and stress at work, which explains the evolutionary criterion of the burnout process of Maslach (Jimenez and al, 2014; Golembiewski, 1984; Lee and Ashforth, 1996)..

Lack of Personal accomplishment

Finally, the third step is the lack of personal accomplishment. It can be expressed by a sense of worthlessness of one's work; on this basis, the individual will be unmotivated and unable to help the people around him. Cordes and Dougherty (1993) showed that this third step characterized by a tendency to evaluate negatively can be fatal for the company and can have unfavorable

effects on performance. Figure 1 depicts the Sequential Model of Maslach taking into account these three steps.

Figure 1: Sequential Model of Maslach
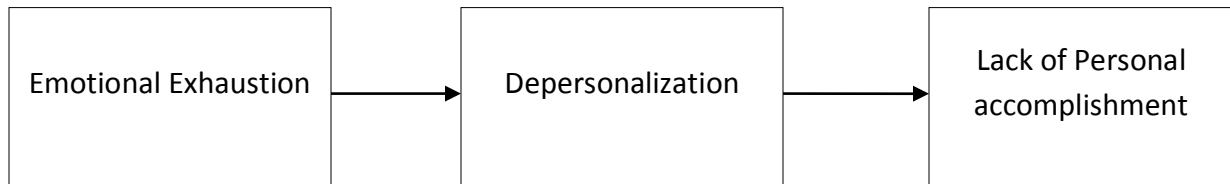
*Source: L.Cordes and W.Dougherty, 1993,

These three dimensions are well designed to be transferable to any profession (Corey, 2015)

3. ENTREPRENEURIAL BURNOUT

During the last decades, studies on entrepreneurship have been carried out essentially on the traits of successful entrepreneurs or the concept of entrepreneurial intention development by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). Recently, it has been   evolved to other areas of research in many sub-fields within several disciplines like economics, management/business administration, sociology, psychology, economic and cultural anthropology, business history, strategy, marketing, finance, and geography—representing a variety of research traditions, perspectives, and methods (Carlsson et al.,2013)

More recently, stress has been described as an important issue for entrepreneurs. *However, little research has been undertaken on the unique obstacles faced by this occupational group.* According to Cooper and Marshall (1976), the causes of stress can be categorized in two main factors: Individual factors such as money worries, bereavement or serious relationship problems, emotional and *personal problems* at *work,* and organizational factors such as poor communication, ineffective management and lack of understanding and a bad working environment. These factors are mentioned in previous research as antecedents of burnout (Shepherd et al., 2010). These authors have shown that "role stress is positively related to burnout and that burnout has a negative impact on organizational commitment, organizational satisfaction, and relative perceived firm performance".

Despite its direct effects on the health of the entrepreneur and the performance of the firm, very little attention has been *devoted* to exploring the negative effects in entrepreneurial activities (Lechat and Torrès, 2016) or the antecedents and consequences of entrepreneurial burnout

(Shepherd et al. 2010). The lack of interest in the issue of burnout in the field of entrepreneurship can be explained partially with the emergence of factors that could impact the positive aspects of the personality of entrepreneurs (Ben Tahar, 2011).

Therefore burnout is considered as "a feeling of psychological, physical and emotional exhaustion, due to stress from working with people under difficult or demanding <u>conditions</u> » (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

According to Maslach and al (2001) burnout is simply defined as 'a sustained response to the chronic work stress comprising of three components: the experience of being emotionally exhausted (emotional exhaustion), negative feelings and attitudes towards the recipients of the service (depersonalization/cynicism) and feelings of low accomplishment and professional failure (lack of personal accomplishment).

Entrepreneurs are not excluded from these definitions since they are directly tied to their work characterized by an unlimited number of tasks and expectations they seek to achieve. A study by Zackarakis, Meyer and De Castro (1999) devoted to the reasons that cause the failure of companies showed that among the principal causes there are the entrepreneurs themselves. Today, an entrepreneur has to face delicate situations, specific and more or less stressful ones especially in the wake of the global economic crisis by acquiring a high financial and social risk and a willingness to keep a high level of proactivity and entrepreneurial vigilance.

According to Tantam (1998), the inability to achieve the expected requirements can lead to high stress levels (Cited in Smith and Mcelwee, 2011). This stress will cause not only physical but also psychological negative effects with a behavior marked by alcoholism, poor decision making, the work / family conflict, causing depression and suicide. The relationship between burnout and depression is not clear; Freudenberg argued already in 1980 that the symptoms of burnout are work related, while depressive symptoms are generally specific to general situations in all other situations and spheres of life (Hakanen and Schaufeli, 2012). Granovetter (2000) said that for many entrepreneurs, lack of the obligations can lead to suicide or thoughts of suicide. *Thus, entrepreneurial burnout becomes a time bomb in the company.*

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data collection: the narrative method

The research has used a narrative method based on the life stories of twelve entrepreneurs who have experienced burnout. Storytelling is a flexible design research method in which the

narrator, posing as subject, attempts to give meaning to his life experience, by organizing it in a clean narrative structure (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1987). Therefore, it gives freedom to the responder to tell his biography and experience in a particular situation. According to Bertaux and Kohli (1984) "there is life story when a subject tells another person, researcher or not, some episodes of his lived experience». More, Yin (1994) suggests that case studies are the best adapted methods when it is about questions of type "how" or "why"; the researcher has little or no control on the events and the phenomenon is contemporary. This method is advocated and adapted for the study. It aims to know and understand the basics of workplace burnout, signs and symptoms associated with it.

The narrative interviews permit us to generate stories. All interviews were conducted at the workplace of the interviewee. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. The replies were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the resulting text was interpreted. The following table presents the process of obtaining narrative interviews in a structured way:

Table 1 - Main phases of the narrative interview:

Phases of the Narrative interview	Rules for the interview
Preparation	Exploring the field Formulating exmanent questions.
Initialization	Formulation of the initial topic for narration. Use visual aids.
Main narration	No interruptions. Only non-verbal or paralinguistic encouragement to continue telling the story Wait for signals the end of the ("coda").
Questioning phase	Only question: What happened then? No opinion or attitude questions No arguing on contradictions do not ask: Why? Go from exmanent into immanent questions
Small talk	Stop recording. Only question allowed is why? Make note immediately after the interview

Source: Jovchelovich and Bauer (2002)

The Research Model is set in three stages. First, we studied the lifestyle of the entrepreneurs. So the respondents were asked to describe their feelings, related to work. Secondly, to identify burnout, we used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, 1981), which identifies three dimensions of burnout, those being emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism) and

personal accomplishment which describe feelings, related to work. Thirdly, we asked entrepreneurs to talk about the solutions adopted to avoid or minimize the feeling of burnout.

4.2. Sample:

Surveying was carried out on a sample of randomly chosen entrepreneurs who have experienced burnout associed with internal (the characteristics of the leader) and *external* factors (the characteristics of the environment). So, on the basis of these inclusion criteria, 60 entrepreneurs were identified and contacted by telephone. After mailing them our research project, only twelve that matched the criteria agreed to participate in our study. These entrepreneurs are presented in Table 1.

Table 2: Characteristics of entrepreneurs

Interviewee	Age	Area of activity	Duration of job occupation	Nature of burnout
Interviewee 1	55 years	Hotel Industry	13 years	internal
Interviewee 2	42 years	Travel Agency	08 years	Internal
Interviewee 3	45 years	Insurance, bank	15 years	Internal
Interviewee 4	39 years	Building Construcon	07 years	Internal
Interviewee 5	42 years	Impor	13 years	internal
Interviewee 6	50 years	Real Estate	12 years	internal
Interviewee 7	39 years	Web Developement	09 years	external
Interviewee 8	42 years	Audit, Consulting	13 years	external
Interviewee 9	52 years	We Development	12 years	external
Interviewee 10	35 years	Innovative Products Sale	07 years	external
Interviewee 11	45 years	Audit, Consulting	13 years	external
Interviewee 12	43 years	Vocational Training	14 years	external

5. DATA ANALYIS AND RESULTS

The aim of the present study was to analyze and interpret the narrative of twelve Tunisian entrepreneurs' experience of burnout associated with external (group 1) or *internal* factors (group 2). This method permits us to *elucidate the meanings of* people's *lived experiences* through the interpretation of an individual's narrative *storytelling*.

During the content analysis process and according to the dimensions presented by Maslach (1981), three themes were analyzed: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment for each group.

5.1. Entrepreneurs' experience of burnout associated with external factors: (group 1):

The members of this group are entrepreneurs working in the hotel industry, travel agency, building construction etc ... These activities are directly and necessarily influenced by political decisions, environmental security and economic development. Indeed, the feeling of burnout in these entrepreneurs is explained as follows:

5.1.1. Emotional exhaustion:

All of the entrepreneurs said they feel emotional exhaustion rather than physical exhaustion. They fail to give 100% of their effort to improve their business because they do not have control over the external situation of the environment which is in a strong correlation with their activities. We cite these excerpts as examples:

"For me, being exhausted is moral. When you do not seem to find a solution to a problem, not because you're not competent but because the solution is not in your hands and it depends on other factors outside the company."

Two interviewees explained the feeling of exhaustion and defined the feeling of exhaustion as a feeling of destructive stress. As evidenced by the following excerpt:

"When I'm exhausted because of external factors, I try not to transfer my feelings to my employees but it happens at times that I communicate my stress in the form of an act of victimization and that's what makes them also stressed, yet negatively."

5.1.2. Depersonalization:

Entrepreneurs in this group said that when they are exhausted, they want to work alone without being disturbed, yet, just for a short period because as the leaders of the company they are always in demand. So they try escaping responsibility in the short term or working with low productivity until the situation of the environment gets better.

"Of course everyone has the time in which he does not want to be disturbed and does not want to contact anybody even his employees. It should not last long. Who will run our business if I walk away? It's true the good manager is the one who can delegate tasks but the problem is that you cannot delegate the difficult operations. The chief is the chief."

During our interview we asked the participants about the possibility of changing the field of activity or project and almost all of them said that if they find the opportunity to change the activity they will do. So, we can cite an example:

"Absolutely yes. If I find an opportunity, I will change to a project whose environment has a lesser role."

While only one interviewee responded that he would not change the activity because he is, on the one hand attached to his project and wants to carry on till the end and on the other hand, he cannot take any risks at the moment.

"Today I do not want to make a change not for the lack of confidence but by opportunism because I believe a lot in my project so I will stay in the same area."

5.1.3. Personal accomplishment:

Personal Accomplishment for these entrepreneurs is distinguished with two main aspects: the creation of wealth and prestige. In fact, the more wealth creation and increase at the level of the sales, the more satisfaction and valorization of their work there. So when their revenue is influenced by the external environment (tourism for example), they realize the real lack of personal accomplishment and therefore an upward increase in the feeling of exhaustion. We quote this passage as an example:

"We all work and we star projects for one simple reason: to make money. Several obstacles make it difficult to achieve but I always try to limit them as having money is vital not only for me but also for the company."

"I always try to make my project succeed and improve it because as you know; to have a successful project is a source of prestige and money in our community. Unfortunately in Tunisia, those who fail to improve their projects are harshly criticized."

5.2. Entrepreneurs' experience of burnout associated with internal factors (group 2):

Members of this group are entrepreneurs working in Web Development, vocational training, innovation and high technology. These activities are not dependent on the influence of the external environment in the first place but mainly on the skills and experiences of the entrepreneur himself in this area. Indeed, the feeling of burnout among these entrepreneurs is explained below:

5.2.1. Emotional exhaustion:

The interviewees affirmed that the long hours and pressure of their tasks oblige them to feel physical exhaustion rather than an emotional one. They always try to give the maximum to differentiate themselves from their competitors by providing new methods and products on the market. These entrepreneurs have a particular philosophy. They prepare themselves psychologically to be able to work all day. We can cite as an example this excerpt:

"I feel certainly tired after a stressful workday full of union bargaining and negotiating with customers for ten hours but we try to prepare ourselves psychologically to face these workdays."

These entrepreneurs continue to find periods of convalescence and getting away from work during weekends spending them without any contact with work, but for a short time because they are still trying to reach their mission as quickly as possible.

5.2.2. Depersonalization:

The results of this group do not differ greatly from the results of the other group except at the level of a few points. These entrepreneurs have also confirmed that they choose to leave their work for specific times; it's not because of the environment but because of fatigue or problems within the company. They explained that this detachment should be short because each day of delay in their work means a new favorable opportunity for their competitors.

Like the other group, we asked the same question of whether they want to change their field of activity and take the risk of working in another field. The answer was clear and simple for most interviewees: they love their work and never want to leave, but in case of bankruptcy they are ready to make another attempt in the same field.

"I love my job and I cannot imagine working in another field."

"I love what I do, I'm fascinated by high technology and you cannot be bothered because it changes all the time."

5.2.3. Personal accomplishment:

We noticed that four entrepreneurs out of six in this group use self-criticism to assess their work and personality. Indeed, they are never 100% satisfied with what they do but they do it in a positive way. So they are always trying to develop and intensify their efforts.

"You always have to try to be better. Then you can develop yourself, do a good performance, and learn. Never say 'ok it's good I achieved my goal' because if you do then this is the death of your business.''

These entrepreneurs explain that each project has as a main objective, the maximization of profit. However, they like to be proud of their work and their product even if they do not sell it. We cite this as an example:

"In our business, we make products on customer demand and according to their needs. I also I ask my employees to create, innovate. Even if the customer refuses to buy this product, I am proud of what I did."

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Discription "sentiment of burnout":

6.1.1. Exhaustion:

After consulting the content analysis of the interviews of the entrepreneurs of the two groups, we found a difference in the feeling of exhaustion depending on the company's business. Entrepreneurs with an activity very influenced by the external environment are able to spend more time thinking about their potential actions but in most cases they cannot find solutions to their problems easily because the solution depends primarily on decisions taken by the external environment, which negatively affects their morale, as it is responsible for emotional exhaustion with limited or no presence of physical exhaustion.

The situation of entrepreneurs who have an activity that depends primarily on the skills of entrepreneurs rather than the requirements of external environmental is characterized by long working hours as well as a progressive commitment to their profession, a desire to improve and being as productive as possible each day. They even face adjustment problems during retirement which is why they are always physically tired and have to make double efforts and thus be faced with physical exhaustion rather than an emotional exhaustion.

6.1.2. Depersonalization:

Entrepreneurs with a sense of physical exhaustion tend to move away from their work for a short time to recuperate their energy and get back in shape while those with emotional exhaustion rather than physical have no problem changing their job and move to another one.

### 6.1.3. Personal accomplishment:

The indices of lack of personal accomplishment differ according to the category of the entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs of the "environment" group measure their personal accomplishment by the presence of the results of high financial performance in the company while entrepreneurs influenced by internal factors evaluate their personal performance with the quality of their contribution at work and with the degree of satisfaction of their clientele.

6.2. Sequential model of entrepreneurial burnout:

Many researchers agree that the burnout is an evolutionary process through time. Indeed, several models have been proposed in the literature. In this respect, it is worth noting the model of Maslach (1981) and the model of Golembiewski (1984). For our part, we offered two conceptual models that represent the dimensional evolution of burnout among the leaders on the basis of the results generated during the interviews. Therefore, two figures are presented: Figure 1 indicates the entrepreneurs influenced by external factors and Figure 2 the entrepreneurs influenced by internal factors.

For the "environment" group, exhaustion is the time key to declare the beginning of a feeling of burnout. This exhaustion mainly appeared as an emotional exhaustion due to the pressure of the environment. This is what generates parallel light or absent physical exhaustion. These feelings will motivate depersonalization and a lack of personal accomplishment. The accumulation of these sensations will push entrepreneurs in this group to make a decision about their future within the company: either they change their activity and field or they will pause and return to the same activity taking the risk of facing their feelings of burnout in an uncontrolled way. For Sherman and al (2015), entrepreneurs who suffer from a decline in well-being may burn out and close their businesses.

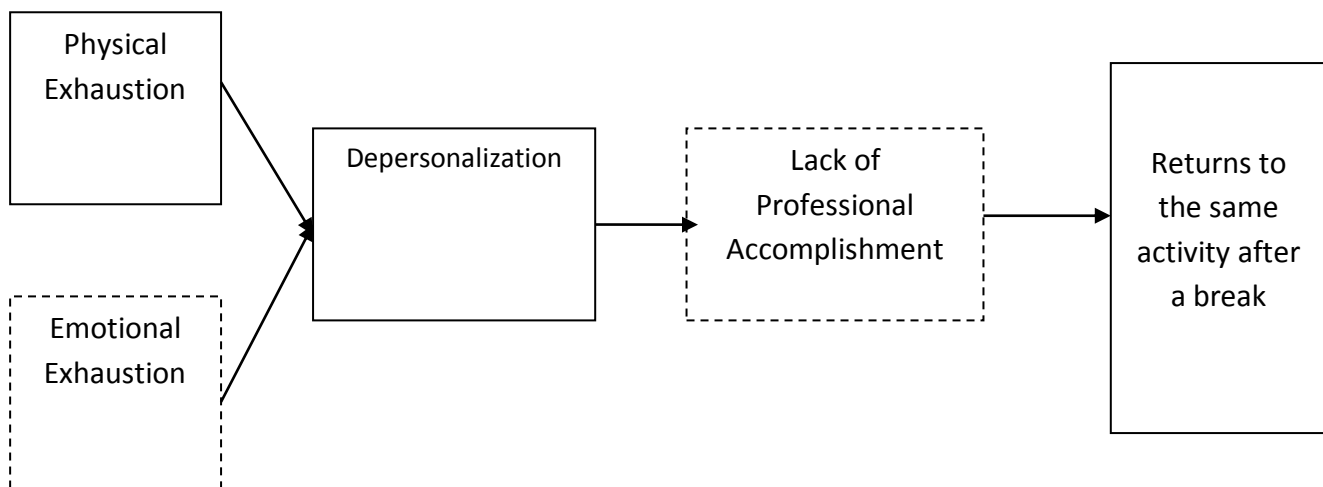**Figure 1: The Sequential model of Burnout in the Group 1**
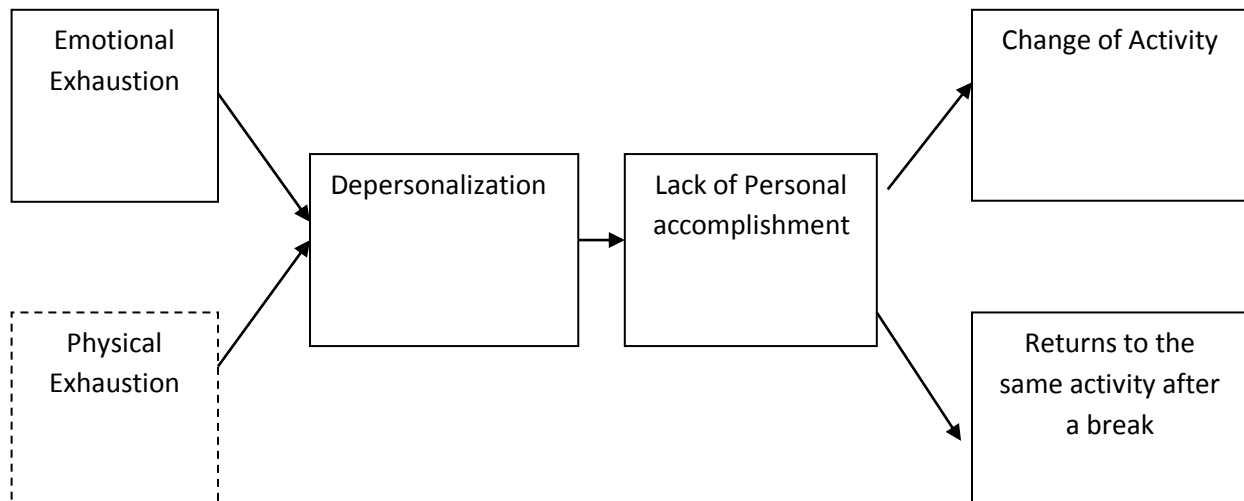
Source: elaborated by the researcher

The group of entrepreneurs influenced by internal factors is characterized by entrepreneurs working for long hours. That is why they are often physically exhausted but they are at the same

time committed to their work. So for them emotional exhaustion is very light and is periodic which can sometimes be caused by conflicts with customers. The increase of the feeling of exhaustion therefore causes depersonalization but the feeling of lack of personal accomplishment is very rare because they have a sense of a high attachment to their work even during moments of crisis. At times, when a high burnout score is figured, these entrepreneurs still decide to take a break and return to the same activity and never change their field even if they change their project.

Figure 2 : The sequential model of Burnout in the Group 2

Source: elaborated by the researcher

CONCLUSION

This present research aimed at better understanding the phenomenon of entrepreneurial burnout while focusing on the particularity of the dimensions shown in the sequential model of Maslach (1981). A qualitative study was conducted across the narratives of twelve entrepreneurs of each of the three previously mentioned dimensions taking into account two factors that influence the *entrepreneurial lifestyle*: the external environment and the skills of the entrepreneurs.

After analysing the data collected and according to the dimensionality of Maslach's (1981) three aspects of job burnout, the results show that entrepreneurs who depend on the environment (group 1) are more emotionally exhausted than physically and they want to change their field of activity and work in another sector in case of exhaustion. Furthermore, entrepreneurs with strong

competence (group 2) like those in the technology field are more physically exhausted than emotionally; yet, they do not want to change their activities not even when they are exhausted because they are highly committed to their work.

As expected, our classification of entrepreneurs helped point out the critical role of the environment and its influence on the nature of decisions ready at the level of career enhancement as well as the health of some leaders. This is already a step towards interventions to better understand the feelings of burnout in the internal and external contexts of the company. By analyzing previous research that study entrepreneurial burnout, we find a remarkable lack in the treatment of the effect of external and internal environment at the level of exhaustion of the entrepreneur.

Like any research, this paper has limitations, yet, it paves the way for further research:

This research was conducted in the Tunisian context after the revolution. So, the social, political and economic context of the two groups interviewed can affect the results. Further researche can be conducted in different countries and cultures for the generalizability of the results. Moreover, we used only the three dimension of Maslach for the narrative analysis. Researchers could use different and more recent scales to confirm and test our *results*.

Despite the limitations evoked, our research paves the way for new research perspectives. Indeed, it would be interesting to conduct empirical studies that opt to study the characteristics of the feeling of entrepreneurial burnout as well as the relationship with other antecedents and consequences of this symptom. On the other hand, it would be desirable to build a measurement scale specific to professional burnout that entrepreneurs suffer from taking into consideration the characteristics of the latter.

ACKOWLEDGEMENT

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