Psychological Indicators of Parental Burnout in Families with Three or More Children

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the psychological indicators of parental burnout among families with three or more children through a qualitative lens. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study recruited 23 parents (15 mothers and 8 fathers) from Isfahan, Iran, all of whom had at least three children. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in age, socioeconomic status, and employment. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify major categories and subcategories of psychological distress related to parental burnout. Three overarching themes emerged: emotional exhaustion, cognitive dysfunction, and detachment with identity strain. Emotional exhaustion included persistent fatigue, emotional numbness, and an inability to recover despite rest. Cognitive dysfunction was marked by decision-making fatigue, concentration issues, and internalized self-criticism. Detachment and identity strain manifested as emotional distancing from children, role imbalance, and the erosion of personal identity. Mothers reported greater levels of guilt and emotional overload compared to fathers. Participants attributed these psychological symptoms to the cumulative demands of raising multiple children in the absence of adequate social and institutional support. The findings highlight that parental burnout in large families is a multidimensional experience affecting emotional, cognitive, and relational well-being. Cultural expectations, lack of systemic support, and internalized ideals of "good parenting" intensify this condition. Interventions should prioritize mental health resources for multi-child families and promote societal recognition of parental burnout as a legitimate psychological concern.

Keywords: Parental burnout; large families; emotional exhaustion; identity strain; qualitative research; psychological well-being; parenting stress

Introduction

The psychological dynamics of modern parenting are shaped by a constellation of cultural, structural, and individual-level factors. Among them, the number of children in the household plays a crucial role in shaping parental well-being. Evidence suggests that as the number of children increases, parental stress rises proportionately, while subjective well-being often declines (1). In societies where traditional extended family support systems are diminishing and dual-income households are becoming the norm, parenting large families can generate unique psychological burdens, including persistent fatigue, emotional detachment, cognitive overload, and identity confusion.

A growing body of research underscores the need to explore how multiple-child households impact parental mental health, especially in relation to burnout. Vu and Phung (1) found that higher child quantity is significantly associated with a decline in psychological well-being and life satisfaction among parents. Similarly, Mugyenyi et al. (2) reported that authoritarian parenting styles, which tend to emerge under chronic stress, negatively affect not only children's development but also the mental health of parents. These findings suggest a reciprocal loop in which children's behavioral outcomes and parental stress reinforce one another, leading to burnout.

While parental burnout has been widely studied in Western contexts, its culturally embedded manifestations in Middle Eastern or Asian family systems remain under-examined. In such cultures, parents of large families often face additional psychological pressures stemming from religious, social, and moral expectations of parental sacrifice and resilience (3). Furthermore, parents often hesitate to articulate or validate their psychological distress due to cultural taboos around vulnerability and self-care, thereby internalizing their struggles and exacerbating emotional fatigue.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these pressures by collapsing the boundaries between domestic and professional life, increasing household labor, and decreasing access to external support systems (4, 5). According to Urban et al. (4), parents in large families during the pandemic reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower levels of resilience, especially in the absence of external protective factors such as childcare assistance or mental health support. Similarly, Everri et al. (5) highlighted how disrupted parent-child dynamics during home confinement contributed to increased parental anxiety and burnout.

Parental burnout is not merely a transitory reaction to environmental stressors but is increasingly recognized as a chronic psychological condition with significant consequences for both parents and children. Ferraro et al. (6) demonstrated that parental emotional dysregulation in families managing chronic child illness is predictive of deteriorating psychological outcomes in children. In families with multiple children, these dynamics become particularly complex, as parents must simultaneously manage the differentiated needs of several dependents, often without adequate support. Du (7) argues that emotional well-being in child-parent relationships is best understood through mutual regulatory mechanisms, where the affective state of the parent plays a critical role in shaping the child's emotional development—and vice versa.

Studies have also shown that parental burnout is linked with impaired executive functioning, poor emotion regulation, and heightened negative affect (8). Baker et al. found that cumulative caregiving stress in parents of children with intellectual disabilities not only predicted depressive symptoms but also led to significant impairments in decision-making and emotional flexibility. These cognitive and affective

dysfunctions mirror what many parents of large families describe: an ongoing internal conflict between ideal parenting standards and the limits of their psychological capacity.

In particular, mothers appear to bear a disproportionate share of burnout-related symptoms. Kılıç et al. (9) demonstrated that emotional dysregulation in early childhood parenting among Turkish mothers was associated with both lower psychological well-being and increased parental strain. Similarly, Osman and Whitley (10) noted that mothers of children with special educational needs experienced a significantly greater emotional burden during the pandemic, reflecting an unequal division of caregiving responsibilities. These findings reinforce the necessity of a gendered analysis of parental burnout, particularly in cultures where maternal sacrifice is idealized.

Family systems theory and ecological frameworks further underscore the importance of examining contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, parental employment, and access to social support (11, 12). Socioeconomic instability increases the likelihood of parental burnout by compounding daily stressors and limiting access to coping resources. Treviño et al. (11) found that lower socioeconomic status coupled with limited parental involvement in education led to a sharp decline in subjective well-being. Similarly, Martínez-Donate et al. (12) showed that family disruptions such as deportation or separation had profound negative effects on the psychological functioning of both parents and children.

Beyond external pressures, the internal psychological mechanisms by which burnout manifests—such as guilt, detachment, and identity loss—must also be explored. Maggino (13) observed that children's psychological states exert a significant influence on parents' emotional health, particularly through feedback loops involving behavior, mood, and perceived parental efficacy. Conversely, parental well-being is a foundational determinant of children's developmental outcomes (14). These bi-directional influences complicate the isolation of burnout as a parent-only condition, demanding a more systemic perspective.

Emerging research also points to the role of digital technologies and remote communication in shaping the well-being of parents and children. Zatayumni and Siregar (15) emphasized that technology-mediated parental involvement, such as virtual support and remote communication, plays a crucial role in sustaining emotional closeness and alleviating burnout. This is particularly relevant for parents managing multiple children under time constraints, as technology may serve as both a source of support and a site of stress depending on how it is utilized.

Furthermore, incarceration, migration, and family separation are external conditions that can amplify burnout among parents of large families, particularly when one caregiver is absent. Herreros-Fraile et al. (16) showed that parental incarceration produces not only structural vulnerabilities in children but also immense psychological strain on the remaining caregiver. Similar findings by Raturi and Cebotari (17) revealed that children's psychological outcomes are deeply impacted by the emotional state of migrant parents, especially when parental burnout and guilt intersect.

These studies collectively underscore the multifactorial and transgenerational consequences of parental burnout. Psychological distress in parents not only reduces their functional capacity and decision-making quality but also creates a climate of emotional instability within the family system. The need for early detection, culturally sensitive assessment tools, and context-aware interventions is therefore urgent.

In this study, we aim to explore the psychological indicators of parental burnout specifically in families with three or more children in the city of Isfahan, Iran.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with a content analysis approach to explore the psychological indicators of parental burnout among families with three or more children. The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' subjective experiences and meanings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under study. A total of 23 parents (both mothers and fathers) residing in Isfahan, Iran, participated in the research. All participants had at least three children and reported experiencing varying levels of psychological strain associated with parenting responsibilities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, emotional responses, and cognitive interpretations related to parental burnout. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on stress, fatigue, emotional distancing, and feelings of inadequacy in the parenting role. Probing questions were used to deepen understanding and clarify meanings. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and was conducted either in participants' homes or a neutral, quiet setting to ensure comfort and privacy. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new categories or themes emerged from the interviews.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The data were systematically coded and categorized using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Initial open coding was followed by axial coding to identify patterns, connections, and emerging themes. Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in constant comparison, memo writing, and reflective practices to enhance analytical rigor and thematic coherence. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with a subset of participants, and peer debriefing sessions among the research team. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the participants and research context.

Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 23 participants, all of whom were parents residing in Isfahan, Iran, with three or more children. Of the participants, 15 were mothers (65%) and 8 were fathers (35%), ranging in age from 32 to 48 years. The majority (n = 17, 74%) held at least a bachelor's degree, while the remaining six participants (26%) had a high school diploma or equivalent. Regarding employment status, 11 participants (48%) were full-time homemakers, 7 (30%) were employed in part-time or freelance jobs, and 5 (22%) held full-time professional positions. Most families (n = 14, 61%) had three children, while 9 families (39%) had four or more children. Marital duration ranged from 8 to 23 years, with an average of 14.2 years. All participants reported living in dual-parent households at the time of the study.

Table 1. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Open Codes (Concepts) of Parental Burnout

Main Theme	Subtheme	Open Codes (Concepts)
1. Emotional Exhaustion	Persistent Fatigue	Lack of physical energy, morning tiredness, sleep deprivation, constant caregiving, low motivation, need for rest
	Emotional Drain	Frequent crying, emotional numbness, mood swings, anger toward children, internal emptiness
	Lack of Emotional Recovery	Feeling unrefreshed after rest, emotional inertia, inability to relax, chronic irritability
	Overload from Multiple Roles	Juggling parenting and work, invisible labor, emotional pressure, unfair responsibility distribution
	Loneliness in Parenting	Absence of support, feeling isolated, emotional abandonment by spouse, social withdrawal
	Decline in Mental Health	Anxiety symptoms, depressive thoughts, low mood, emotional breakdown
	Emotional Guilt	Blaming self for not being "good enough," guilt after shouting, self-doubt, shame over parenting mistakes
2. Cognitive Dysfunction	Concentration Difficulties	Memory lapses, trouble focusing, mind going blank, frequent forgetfulness
	Decision-Making Fatigue	Indecisiveness, mental overload in small tasks, avoidance of planning, mental fatigue
	Rumination and Negative Self-Talk	Repetitive negative thinking, internal criticism, catastrophizing, self-devaluation
	Decreased Sense of Efficacy	Feeling incapable, fear of failure, questioning parenting competence, learned helplessness
	Mental Rigidity	Resistance to change, inflexible routines, black-and-white thinking
3. Detachment and Identity Strain	Emotional Distancing from Children	Mechanical caregiving, loss of affection, feeling emotionally "numb" around kids, avoidance of interaction
	Identity Conflict	Struggling with "parent-only" identity, forgetting self before motherhood/fatherhood, loss of career identity, fading personal dreams
	Role Imbalance	Feeling overshadowed by parental role, absence of personal time, over-identification with caregiver identity
	Marital Disconnection	Reduced couple intimacy, conflict over childrearing, emotional disconnection, blaming each other
	Social Role Constriction	Reduction in friendships, lack of social outings, decreased interaction outside family, social disengagement

Theme 1: Emotional Exhaustion

Persistent Fatigue: Many participants reported a chronic state of physical depletion that did not improve with rest. The overwhelming caregiving responsibilities left them in a cycle of unrelieved tiredness. One mother shared, *"Even when I sleep, I wake up more tired. There's no time to recover; every day is a repeat of the last".* The burden of household chores, night-time interruptions, and managing multiple children drained their energy reserves.

Emotional Drain: Parents frequently described feeling emotionally hollow, with limited capacity for emotional expression or connection. Irritability and sudden anger were common. A father stated, *"Sometimes I shout, not because I want to, but because I feel nothing—just pressure building up".* These emotional outbursts were often followed by guilt and shame.

Lack of Emotional Recovery: Even when given time away from their children, participants often failed to regain emotional balance. They felt emotionally "stuck," describing a sense of emotional inertia. *"I took a weekend off, but I came back just as exhausted. It's like my emotional battery doesn't charge anymore",* said one mother of four.

Overload from Multiple Roles: The stress of managing overlapping roles—parent, worker, spouse—was a recurring theme. Participants felt constantly stretched. One respondent commented, *"I go from being*

a mom to a cook to a teacher to a cleaner without a break. I don't remember when I last sat down without a task in mind".

Loneliness in Parenting: Despite being surrounded by children, many parents reported intense emotional loneliness. The lack of adult conversation or shared responsibility heightened feelings of isolation. *"I feel like I'm raising these kids alone. Even when my husband is home, it's like I'm the only parent"*, noted one participant.

Decline in Mental Health: Participants described increased symptoms of anxiety, low mood, and emotional instability. Feelings of despair and burnout often overlapped with signs of psychological distress. A mother explained, *"Some days, I cry in the bathroom so no one sees. I don't know why—I just feel broken"*.

Emotional Guilt: Guilt was a pervasive emotional experience. Participants often judged themselves harshly for not meeting their ideal standards as parents. One parent said, *"I yelled at my daughter yesterday, and I haven't forgiven myself since. I feel like a terrible mother"*.

Theme 2: Cognitive Dysfunction

Concentration Difficulties: Difficulty focusing and frequent memory lapses were common among participants. They struggled to remain mentally present even in routine tasks. A father noted, *"I forget things all the time now—appointments, what I walked into a room for, even names"*.

Decision-Making Fatigue: Participants expressed being overwhelmed by the sheer number of daily decisions. Even minor choices felt cognitively taxing. *"Choosing what to cook feels like solving a math problem. I stare at the fridge and can't think"*, said one overwhelmed mother.

Rumination and Negative Self-Talk: Many respondents described a constant internal dialogue marked by self-criticism and worry. This rumination led to a downward emotional spiral. A participant shared, *"At night I lie awake thinking of everything I did wrong as a parent that day. It's exhausting"*.

Decreased Sense of Efficacy: A sense of helplessness and inadequacy emerged strongly. Participants doubted their competence as caregivers. One mother admitted, *"I don't think I'm good at this. Other parents seem to cope. I'm just trying to survive"*.

Mental Rigidity: Burned-out parents exhibited resistance to change, relying on fixed routines even when they were no longer effective. A participant commented, *"I do the same bedtime routine every night because I just can't handle surprises anymore"*. This rigidity was a coping mechanism but often worsened stress.

Theme 3: Detachment and Identity Strain

Emotional Distancing from Children: Several participants reported that their emotional connection to their children had weakened. Interactions became mechanical and devoid of joy. One mother revealed, *"I take care of them, but I don't feel anything anymore. I'm just going through the motions"*.

Identity Conflict: Participants experienced an internal crisis regarding their identity beyond parenthood. Many expressed a loss of self. *"I used to be a teacher, a friend, someone with hobbies. Now, I don't even know who I am without my children around"*, said one participant.

Role Imbalance: An imbalance between personal needs and parental responsibilities was commonly reported. The parental role consumed most of their time and energy. One father stated, *"There's no space for me in my own life anymore. It's like I only exist to serve others"*.

Marital Disconnection: Parenting stress had significant effects on spousal relationships. Reduced intimacy and increased conflict were frequently mentioned. *"We're more like co-managers of a daycare than a couple. We only talk about the kids now"*, said one parent.

Social Role Constriction: Participants reported a noticeable reduction in their social interactions. Friendships faded, and time for leisure disappeared. *"I used to go out with friends once a month—now, I haven't seen anyone outside my family in a year"*, shared a mother of five.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the psychological indicators of parental burnout in families with three or more children using a qualitative design. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 23 parents residing in Isfahan, three overarching themes were identified: emotional exhaustion, cognitive dysfunction, and detachment accompanied by identity strain. These findings highlight the multilayered and systemic nature of burnout in large-family parenting contexts and offer deep insights into how chronic caregiving demands affect parents' emotional, cognitive, and relational well-being.

The first and most prominent theme, emotional exhaustion, reflects the intense and ongoing depletion of emotional and physical resources among parents. Participants frequently described symptoms such as chronic fatigue, irritability, emotional blunting, and an inability to emotionally recharge. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that increased parenting demands, especially in families with multiple children, directly contribute to diminished psychological reserves and heightened emotional fatigue (1, 6). Research by Urban et al. (4) during the COVID-19 pandemic similarly emphasized how the compounding pressures of home confinement, loss of external childcare, and round-the-clock caregiving responsibilities escalated parental distress and emotional exhaustion. Our results also echo those of Everri et al. (5), who showed that emotional strain in family dynamics can significantly undermine family resilience, particularly in households with limited coping resources.

Participants also described cognitive dysfunction, particularly in the form of attention lapses, indecision, negative self-talk, and reduced executive functioning. This is consistent with Baker et al.'s (8) findings, which demonstrated that chronic stress in parenting—especially among those caring for multiple dependents—can impair cognitive control and emotion regulation. Similarly, the association between parental distress and compromised mental flexibility has been noted in studies exploring caregiving in high-demand environments, including among parents of children with special needs (9, 10). In our study, parents often described a "mental shutdown," where simple tasks like deciding what to cook or responding to a child's request became overwhelming, supporting the notion that decision fatigue is a key indicator of parental burnout in multi-child families.

The third theme, detachment and identity strain, revealed how prolonged caregiving demands can lead to emotional distancing from children and confusion around personal identity. Parents frequently expressed that while they continued to perform caregiving tasks, they felt emotionally disconnected from their children, often experiencing guilt for their lack of affective engagement. This aligns with the findings of Maggino (13), who explained that emotional disengagement often results from cumulative psychological strain, especially in caregiving roles that lack validation or support. In our data, parents' reflections revealed an internal conflict between their role expectations and actual emotional capacities, echoing previous

research that links emotional distancing with perceptions of parental inadequacy (2). Moreover, identity confusion was particularly salient among mothers who reported a sense of losing their "pre-parenting" self, aligning with Kılıç et al.'s (9) study on maternal well-being and emotional dysregulation.

An important cross-cutting observation is the gendered nature of parental burnout. Although both mothers and fathers reported symptoms of burnout, mothers disproportionately described emotional guilt, role overload, and identity loss. This resonates with previous studies highlighting gendered expectations in caregiving and their influence on psychological well-being (18, 19). Collischon et al. found that women were more likely than men to experience reduced subjective well-being in response to changes in family structure and childcare demands, particularly in households with multiple children. Our findings support this claim, as mothers often reported being solely responsible for the emotional and physical labor of parenting, despite being in dual-parent households.

Additionally, the data revealed how the absence of support systems—social, institutional, or psychological—exacerbated the experience of burnout. Participants emphasized that a lack of extended family involvement, professional childcare, and community-based mental health services contributed to their emotional and cognitive overload. These findings support prior work by Treviño et al. (11), who identified socioeconomic status and lack of support as significant contributors to parental stress during crisis periods. Similarly, Martínez-Donate et al. (12) highlighted the impact of structural disruptions (such as deportation or family separation) on parental well-being, pointing to the fragility of family systems under pressure. In contexts such as Isfahan, where economic volatility and limited institutional support are common, the risk of parental burnout may be even more pronounced.

One particularly insightful dimension of this study was the observation of reciprocal emotional dynamics between parents and children. Some participants noted that their children's emotional dysregulation, anxiety, or behavioral issues contributed to their own psychological fatigue, thus creating a feedback loop. These observations support the bidirectional models proposed by Du (7) and Maggino (14), where the psychological states of children and parents are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In families with three or more children, managing multiple emotional profiles—each potentially mirroring and amplifying parental distress—places further emotional demands on already strained parents.

Our study also observed how technological tools, when used constructively, could serve as psychological buffers for burnout. A few participants reported that online parenting groups, educational platforms for children, and digital calendars helped them regain a sense of control. These findings are consistent with those of Zatayumni and Siregar (15), who highlighted the potential of remote technology in sustaining parent-child connections and alleviating stress in long-distance or resource-constrained environments. However, not all parents had equal access or digital literacy, suggesting that the protective potential of such technologies may be unevenly distributed.

Further, the data suggested that parental guilt and unrealistic expectations—often internalized from cultural norms or social comparisons—were powerful predictors of burnout. Several participants articulated a deep sense of failure for not being able to maintain emotional composure, household order, or high educational standards for their children. This corresponds with Abbas's (20) research on the impact of children's academic outcomes on parental well-being. In his study, parents of underperforming children often suffered from depressive symptoms and self-blame, particularly in high-pressure academic

environments. This dynamic was echoed in our participants' experiences of anxiety, guilt, and emotional detachment as they struggled to meet perceived societal benchmarks of "good parenting."

Lastly, findings from this study point to the broader policy implications surrounding parental burnout. While psychological distress is often framed as an individual issue, our results reaffirm the importance of systemic, economic, and institutional factors in shaping parental experiences. The work of Mihalec-Adkins and Shlafer (21) on policy responses to parental incarceration underscores how structural interventions can either mitigate or magnify the psychological burden on caregivers. Similarly, Wahyuni et al. (22) advocate for a family-centered approach to caregiving that recognizes the interconnected needs of all family members. These insights reinforce the need for comprehensive family health frameworks that account for contextual vulnerabilities.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to parents residing in Isfahan, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. Second, although the use of semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth data collection, self-reporting biases may have affected participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information such as emotional detachment or guilt. Third, the study did not explicitly account for variables such as the age of the children, socioeconomic bracket, or marital quality, which could significantly influence the manifestation of burnout.

Future studies could expand on this research by employing a mixed-methods approach to triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative measures of parental stress, cognitive load, and emotional regulation. Longitudinal studies would also help to explore how burnout evolves over time and whether certain family life-cycle stages are more vulnerable. Moreover, comparative studies across different cultural contexts would offer a richer understanding of how sociocultural norms mediate the experience of burnout in large families.

Based on the findings, practitioners and policymakers should consider designing community-based support systems for parents of large families, including group counseling, parenting workshops, and accessible mental health resources. Schools and pediatric clinics can serve as key intervention points to identify early signs of parental burnout. Additionally, awareness campaigns should aim to destigmatize parental fatigue and emotional vulnerability, encouraging parents to seek help before burnout becomes entrenched. Supporting parents ultimately strengthens the entire family unit.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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