


Chapter 10

The Invisible Load: Identity Struggles and Burnout in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

Burnout in the public sector is a complex issue influenced by systemic inequities and identity-based stressors. This chapter examines the intersection of identity and burnout, focusing on how factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation amplify vulnerabilities in public sector workplaces. Using Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality as analytical frameworks, the chapter explores the unique challenges faced by marginalized employees and provides actionable strategies to mitigate burnout. Key solutions include inclusive leadership development, equity audits, flexible work arrangements, and mentorship programs. By addressing identity-based inequities and fostering inclusive organizational cultures, public sector organizations can enhance employee well-being, improve performance, and strengthen trust with the communities they serve.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment, poses a pervasive challenge across industries. Yet, its ramifications are particularly severe in the public sector, where employees grapple with high-stress environments, constrained resources, and the moral imperatives of serving diverse populations. These factors are further compounded by systemic

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-0169-3.ch010

inequities, with identity-based dynamics—such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status—creating unique and layered vulnerabilities to burnout.

The intersection of identity and burnout reveals profound disparities. Women of color, individuals with marginalized sexual orientations, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face “double jeopardy” in navigating both organizational and societal biases. Public sector employees frequently contend with microaggressions, exclusionary practices, and the emotional toll of representing underrepresented groups in leadership. These compounded stressors not only undermine individual well-being but also impair organizational performance and trust with the communities served.

This chapter draws on Social Identity Theory and Intersectionality to examine how identity-based stressors contribute to burnout in the public sector. These frameworks provide insight into how identity affiliations shape self-perception and workplace experience, and how overlapping systems of oppression intensify vulnerability to burnout.

The public sector workforce, by design, reflects the diversity of the populations it serves. However, this diversity often exists within the constraints of bureaucratic structures, high emotional labor demands, and limited autonomy. These factors contribute significantly to burnout, particularly for employees from marginalized backgrounds. Research indicates that women, individuals with marginalized sexual orientations, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with intersecting identities experience burnout at disproportionately higher rates due to systemic inequities and identity-based stressors (Ashikali et al., 2021; Roberson & Perry, 2022).

By addressing burnout through the lens of identity and intersectionality, this chapter highlights not only the human and organizational costs of inaction but also the transformative potential of inclusive practices. Creating equitable workplaces in the public sector is not merely an ethical imperative—it is a strategic necessity to enhance employee resilience, foster community trust, and ensure the effective delivery of public services.

The discussion unfolds in three key sections. The first provides a theoretical grounding in burnout, emphasizing its dimensions and relevance to public sector dynamics. The second section integrates empirical research and case studies to illustrate the intersectional challenges faced by marginalized employees. Finally, the chapter presents actionable solutions, including mentorship programs, equity audits, inclusive leadership development, and policy reforms, aimed at fostering equity and reducing burnout in public sector organizations. By integrating these perspectives, the chapter seeks to:

Explore the Influence of Identity: Examine how identity-based factors, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, shape burnout experiences in the public sector.

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