



# PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT AND FUNCTIONING STYLES IN A GROUP OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES WORKING IN THE ARMED FORCES

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- There are significant differences between soldiers and civilian workers.
- Results suggest psychological support programs.
- The professional functioning styles were identified: authoritarian and cooperative.
- In article applied the new *Professional Functioning Scale*.

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study aimed to analyze the relationship between the level of professional burnout, professional functioning styles, and occupational activity in a group of soldiers and civilian employees working in the military. The theoretical basis was the model of professional burnout of Christine Maslach and the concept of professional functioning styles developed by Barbara Mróz. **Material and Methods:** The study employed the following tools: Christine Maslach's *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) to measure burnout, Barbara Mróz's new, original *Professional Functioning Scale* (*Skala funkcjonowania zawodowego* – SFZ) in occupational psychology, and a questionnaire assessing the level of occupational activity. **Results:** The results of statistical analyses showed statistically significant differences between soldiers and civilian employees in selected dimensions of burnout (depersonalization  $t = 3.723$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and professional functioning styles (authoritarian  $t = 5.031$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; avoidant  $t = -3.153$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ; cooperative  $t = -4.531$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). All differences were higher among soldiers. Occupational activity proved to be a statistically significant factor differentiating operational effectiveness and stress resistance ( $t = -4.934$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Here, the difference was higher among military personnel. Correlations were found between professional functioning styles and burnout levels (authoritarian and avoidant styles were associated with higher burnout levels, the cooperative style had a protective effect). Soldiers: correlation positive ( $r = 0.270$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), prefer an authoritarian style – based on control, decision-making, and hierarchy. Civilian employees: correlation positive ( $r = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), that the more often used an authoritarian style in their professional functioning, the higher their overall level of burnout was. **Conclusions:** The results obtained are relevant for human resource management in military organizations and for the development of psychological support programs and training in coping with stress and developing effective professional functioning styles. *Med Pr Work Health Saf.* 2026;77(2):111–118

**Key words:** burnout, soldiers, civilian military employees, professional functioning styles, industry activity, *Professional Functioning Scale*

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## INTRODUCTION

The first scientific concept of burnout was proposed by Freudenberger [1], who defined it as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that develops as a result of prolonged stress and excessive commitment to work, especially in professions related to helping others.

A more developed approach was proposed by Maslach, who, together with Jackson, developed a 3-dimensional model of professional burnout [2]. It was this model that

became the theoretical basis for this research. According to Maslach, burnout is a syndrome consisting of 3 dimensions:

- emotional exhaustion, which is characterized by a feeling of mental and physical fatigue resulting from excessive demands at work. A feeling of lack of energy and mental resources to cope with daily professional duties;
- depersonalization is manifested by a negative, cynical attitude towards colleagues or clients, increased irritability, cold or indifferent treatment of others;

■ reduced sense of personal accomplishment – this dimension refers to a feeling of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction with one's work, a feeling that the effort put into work does not bring the expected results, and a negative assessment of one's own competence [2].

Maslach's definition is currently one of the most frequently cited in the literature and forms the basis for the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) diagnostic tool, which is used in burnout research around the world. This model is widely used in studies of professions with a high risk of burnout, such as teachers, doctors and nurses, firefighters, police officers, etc. It is worth applying it to a group of soldiers and civilian employees.

Burnout in the military differs from the phenomenon observed in other professions because it stems from the characteristic features of military service and the unique demands placed on soldiers. The military, as a hierarchical, disciplinary institution that often operates in extreme conditions, generates unique challenges that can lead to burnout.

Participation in foreign missions, such as stabilization or combat operations, is a significant risk factor for burnout. Soldiers are often separated from their families and loved ones for long periods of time. This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and an increased risk of emotional problems. Exposure to dangerous situations, such as gunfire, combat operations, or seeing victims of conflict, can cause long-lasting stress reactions. Burnout in soldiers is often associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [3,4]. Soldiers on missions often work in changing, chaotic conditions, which increases their feeling of lack of control over the situation. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and exhaustion [4–6].

Civilian personnel working in the Ministry of National Defense perform support, administrative, and specialist functions. Their task is to organize the bureaucratic back office of the Ministry of National Defense, including budget planning, human resource management, equipment procurement, logistics, and transport. Civilian military personnel, although not directly involved in combat operations, are also at risk of burnout. The specific nature of their work, resulting from the nature of military organization, generates different risk factors than those affecting soldiers.

In the next theoretical model, the concept of professional functioning styles by Mróz provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between management styles and selected personality traits in a group of managers [7].

This theoretical basis of the study is an important contribution to understanding how the individual characteristics of leaders influence their preferences in terms of management style, as well as organizational effectiveness and climate.

The author's main goal was to identify preferred management styles in the context of personality traits such as conscientiousness, openness to experience, and need for achievement. Mróz assumed in this concept that a leader's personality plays a key role in shaping their management style, and that the choice of a specific style has a direct impact on employee attitudes, organizational atmosphere, and team performance [8].

According to this theory, 3 main styles of professional functioning can be distinguished:

- authoritarian,
- avoidant,
- cooperative.

The authoritarian style is characterized by the dominance of the leader, a focus on achieving goals, and strong control over the team. It is a style associated with a high need for dominance and independence, which works well in situations requiring quick decisions and precise action. However, its excessive use can lead to a decrease in employee motivation and commitment.

The avoidant style is an approach in which the leader withdraws from active management, delegating responsibility to the team. It is often associated with a low need for order and a tendency to avoid responsibility [9,10]. Although this style supports employee autonomy, it carries the risk of disorganization and a decline in team effectiveness.

The collaborative style is considered the most effective. Leaders who use it emphasize building interpersonal relationships, team development, and working together to achieve goals. This style is strongly associated with empathy, compassion, and a need for order. As a result, it supports a positive work atmosphere, motivation, and professional development of employees.

A study conducted on a group of 320 managers using the *Professional Functioning Scale* (*Skala funkcjonowania zawodowego* – SFZ, also developed by Mróz) showed that the cooperative style is the most preferred management model. The SFZ research tool allowed for an accurate diagnosis of the relationship between personality traits and preferences in management styles.

In summary, burnout and professional functioning styles may be interrelated, which is particularly worth investigating in the group of soldiers and civilian military personnel.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Research tools

The first method was applied the MBI by Maslach [2], based on the author's empirical model, which allows for a quantitative assessment of the 3 main components of burnout, i.e., reduced satisfaction with achievements, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization:

- reduced satisfaction with achievements – the scale consists of 8 items that measure the subjective assessment of one's own work, its effects, and the assessment of the effectiveness of coping with problems;
- emotional exhaustion – the scale consists of 9 items that measure the subjective assessment of emotional resources and condition, such as: feeling of general fatigue, lack of energy to work and act in general, and increased nervousness;
- depersonalization – the scale consists of 5 items and measures a specific, instrumental attitude towards people; it is expressed by distance, sometimes cynical verbal reactions.

Each statement is rated on a 7-point scale, taking into account the frequency of specific feelings and symptoms included in the questionnaire. The results of the study are presented in the form of 3 numerical indicators, which correspond to the sum of points on the scales distinguished by Maslach and Jackson [2,8,9].

The second tool used in the article is the SFZ by Mróz, the *Professional Functioning Scale*, which aims to assess styles adopted for coping with stress and work-related challenges [7]. This new and original scale in psychology consists of 40 statements, which should be responded to by selecting an answer on a 5-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). There are 7 statements for each of the professional functioning styles, 17 questions concerning social approval, and 2 buffer questions. It was assumed that professional functioning styles would be understood as undertaking any specific activity or action that leads to a positive professional effect.

The third tool is a proprietary occupational activity survey designed separately for soldiers and civilian military personnel. The survey consists of 2 separate scales, tailored to the nature of the respondents' duties. The survey for soldiers focuses on aspects such as: operational effectiveness, stress resistance, adaptability, interpersonal skills, emotion management, and mental stability. The survey for civilian employees includes an assessment of administrative efficiency, organizational skills, stress management skills, interpersonal skills, professional commitment, and work-life balance.

### Study group

The research was conducted in Opole (Poland) November 2024 – May 2025 and covered 100 respondents, including 50 soldiers and 50 civilian military employees. Its aim was to determine the differences in the professional functioning of both groups and to identify potential factors contributing to or counteracting professional burnout. Among soldiers, people aged 20–35 years accounted for 24%, while the smallest group was people >52 years, who accounted for only 3% of the sample. The majority of the respondents were non-commissioned officers (76%), with the remaining 24% being officers.

In turn, among civilian employees in the military, the largest percentage of respondents were in the 36–51 age group (67%), while the least represented group was the >52 age group (4%) of respondents. The most numerous group were clerks (42%), while the least numerous category were managers (10%) of the sample.

### Research hypotheses

The key issue addressed in the article is burnout among soldiers and civilian military personnel, as well as its relationship with professional functioning styles and occupational activity. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and the Declaration of Helsinki (v. 2013).

The following hypotheses were proposed:

- Hypothesis 1 – soldiers are characterized by a significantly higher level of burnout than civilian employees. Justification: According to the literature on the subject, burnout is a complex psychological phenomenon that affects both representatives of helping professions and people working in hierarchical and highly formalized organizations, such as the police or the military [2,11,12]. Soldiers, as a professional group operating under conditions of high psychological pressure, subordination to orders, and frequent stressful situations, are particularly vulnerable to burnout. Research by Piotrowski [13] and Rychcińska et al. [5] indicates that the specific nature of military service, including activities in life-threatening conditions, long-term separation from family, and the routine nature of many duties, contributes to the development of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decline in the sense of professional effectiveness.
- Hypothesis 2 – soldiers are characterized by a significantly higher level of professional functioning than civilian employees in terms of depersonalization. Justification: As demonstrated in the study

by Mróz et al. [8], the style of professional functioning plays a significant role in this context – authoritarian and avoidant styles correlate with higher levels of burnout, while a cooperative style can have a protective function.

- Hypothesis 3 – soldiers are characterized by a higher level of occupational activity than civilian employees. Justification: As indicated by many studies [7,14,15], excessive professional involvement, combined with high levels of stress, can lead to increased emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, people who take action to develop professionally and cooperate with others show greater resistance to burnout, which confirms the protective nature of occupational activity.
- Hypothesis 4 – authoritarian and avoidant styles are positively correlated with the level of burnout, while the cooperative style shows a negative correlation in a group of soldiers. Justification: As research has shown [7,16], professional functioning style plays a key role in the development and course of burnout. The authoritarian style, characterized by rigidity, control, and low tolerance for uncertainty, promotes higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In turn, an avoidant style – based on withdrawal, avoidance of responsibility, and low commitment – can lead to a reduced sense of personal achievement and alienation at work.
- Hypothesis 5 – authoritarian and avoidant styles are positively correlated with the level of burnout, while the cooperative style is negatively correlated with it in the group of civilian employees. Justification: According to research findings [17–19], professional functioning style affects the level of burnout regardless of the type of job performed. The authoritarian style, often associated with control and inflexibility, can facilitate the development of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, especially in a work environment based on rigid procedures and a low level of agency, which characterizes the administrative structures of the Ministry of National Defense in Poland.

## RESULTS

The aim of this analysis is to test the hypothesis and examine whether there are significant differences in the level of professional burnout and its 3 components (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment) between 2 groups: professional soldiers and civilian employees working in military structures. The results are presented in Table 1.

Analysis of statistical data indicates a statistically significant difference in the scale of depersonalization ( $t = 3.723$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between the 2 groups of respondents. The results obtained are within the average range for soldiers, but are significantly higher than in the civilian army employees. They show that professional soldiers are more likely to emotionally distance themselves from their duties and the people they work with.

Analysis of statistical data indicates the existence of 3 statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of: authoritarian style ( $t = 5.031$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), avoidant style ( $t = -3.153$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ), and cooperative style ( $t = -4.531$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The results obtained are within the average range for the group of soldiers, but are significantly higher than in the group of civilian army employees.

Analysis of statistical data indicates a statistically significant difference in the scale of operational efficiency versus office work efficiency ( $t = -4.934$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) in the groups studied. The results obtained are within the average range for the group of soldiers, but are significantly lower than in the group of civilian military employees. Civilian military employees are more efficient in performing administrative and office tasks than professional soldiers.

An analysis of Pearson's correlation between professional functioning styles and the level of burnout in a group of soldiers showed that the strongest relationship was between the authoritarian style and the overall level of burnout ( $r = 0.270$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

An analysis of the relationship between professional functioning styles and the level of burnout in a group of civilian military employees showed that the strongest correlation was between the authoritarian style and the overall level of burnout ( $r = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the literature on the subject made it possible to present the theoretical context of the phenomena discussed. The introduction focused on the definitions and models of burnout developed by Freudenberger and Maslach [1]. The latter assumes that this construct involves emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment [2]. A new typology of professional functioning styles by Mróz [7] was characterized, consisting of the following styles: authoritarian, avoidant, and cooperative, emphasizing their impact on the functioning of the individual in the work environment. It was pointed out that the authoritarian style, although effective in situations requiring immediate re-

**Table 1.** Differences in the level of professional burnout, professional functioning styles, and occupational activity in soldiers and civilian military employees – study conducted in Opole (Poland), November 2024 – May 2025

	Group 1 (N = 50)		Group 2 (N = 50)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Professional burnout [pts]	59.00	30.23	50.02	24.44	1.633	0.105
emotional exhaustion	20.46	15.10	16.04	11.43	1.650	0.102
depersonalization	7.02	6.82	3.04	3.26	3.723	<b>0.001</b>
decreased sense of accomplishment	31.52	8.31	30.94	9.75	0.320	0.749
Professional functioning style [pts]						
authoritarian	23.36	3.88	19.56	3.67	5.031	<b>0.001</b>
avoidant	22.84	4.43	25.76	4.82	-3.153	<b>0.002</b>
cooperative	21.6	5.75	26.4	4.80	-4.531	<b>0.001</b>
Occupational activity [pts]						
soldiers	24.22	4.15			-0.767	0.444
operating efficiency	3.46	0.78			-4.934	<b>0.001</b>
stress resistance	4.06	0.67			1.316	0.191
adaptability	4.32	0.58			1.099	0.263
interpersonal skills	4.16	0.57			-1.221	0.224
emotion management	4.04	0.69			-1.229	0.221
mental stability	4.18	0.86			0.428	0.668
civilian employees			24.94	5.18	-0.767	0.444
office work efficiency			4.26	0.84	-4.934	<b>0.001</b>
stress management			3.86	0.84	1.316	0.191
organizational skills			4.16	0.85	1.099	0.263
interpersonal skills			4.32	0.73	-1.221	0.224
professional commitment			4.24	0.92	-1.229	0.221
work-life balance			4.1	1.0	0.428	0.668

Group 1 – soldiers, group 2 – civilian military employees.

Bolded are statistically significant values at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

sponse, may contribute to the development of burnout by limiting autonomy and increasing psychological stress.

The evaluation of the research hypotheses showed that:

- Hypothesis 1 – assuming a higher level of burnout among soldiers – was partially confirmed. Soldiers showed a significantly higher level of depersonalization, but in terms of overall burnout and the other 2 dimensions, the differences were not statistically significant. This may be a kind of defense mechanism related to chronic operational stress or the result of the need to maintain readiness to act in dangerous conditions. However, a high level of depersonalization can lead to a decline in the quality of interpersonal relationships and professional commitment,

which in the long term can negatively affect the effectiveness of both the individual and the entire team.

- Hypothesis 2 – assuming a higher level of authoritarian style among soldiers – was confirmed. The above results show that soldiers more often than civilian employees present an authoritarian style of professional functioning, which may result from the hierarchical nature of military service, attachment to discipline, and the need to make decisions in a direct and decisive manner. This style may be functional in situations requiring quick action and unambiguous command, but in the long term, it may limit interpersonal flexibility.
- Hypothesis 3 – suggesting a higher level of occupational activity among soldiers – was not confirmed.

**Table 2.** Pearson's r correlations between burnout and professional functioning styles in the group of soldiers and civilian military employees – study conducted in Opole (Poland), November 2024 – May 2025

Professional functioning style	Pearson's r correlations			
	emotional exhaustion	depersonalization	reduced sense of accomplishment	overall burnout score
<b>Soldiers</b>				
authoritarian	0.136	0.095	0.039	0.270*
avoidant	-0.040	-0.157	0.053	-0.144
cooperative	0.106	0.096	-0.065	0.138
<b>Civilian military employees</b>				
authoritarian	-0.128	0.051	0.197	0.377**
avoidant	-0.007	-0.148	0.106	-0.048
cooperative	-0.010	-0.253	0.427	0.164

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The overall level of activity did not differ significantly between the groups, while civilian employees showed higher scores in terms of office work efficiency. This may be due to the nature of this group's daily duties, which are more focused on organizational, planning, and documentation work. Soldiers, on the other hand, performing operational tasks, may be less involved in typical office duties, which may contribute to lower self-esteem in this area.

- Hypothesis 4 – concerning the relationship between professional functioning styles and burnout among soldiers – was partially confirmed. The authoritarian style was positively associated with burnout, while the cooperative style did not play a significant protective role in this group. Correlation was positive ( $r = 0.270$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), which means that soldiers who prefer an authoritarian style – based on control, decision-making, and hierarchy – may be more prone to burnout in general. Although the strength of this relationship does not exceed the threshold of a moderate correlation, it is noticeable and may be of practical importance in the context of psychosocial prevention.
- Hypothesis 5 – concerning the correlation of functioning styles with burnout in civilian employees – was partially confirmed. The authoritarian style was positively correlated with some dimensions of burnout (especially depersonalization), while the cooperative style was negatively correlated with them. This correlation was positive ( $r = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which means that the more often civilian employees used an authoritarian style in their professional functioning, the higher their overall level

of burnout was. This result may suggest that functioning in a dominant manner, based on control and imposing decisions, may be associated with greater psychological stress and lead to faster burnout.

The military hierarchy, focused on discipline and efficiency, often limits the flexibility of civilian employees. Procedures and rigid organizational rules can hinder the introduction of changes, innovations, or independent decision-making, as indicated by the cited literature and this research [4,20]. Such a system of operation leads to feelings of powerlessness and frustration, especially in situations where civilian employees have ideas for improvements but lack the opportunity to implement them. Civilian employees who experience burnout may show a decrease in commitment to their duties, which negatively affects the efficiency of the entire organization. They also often experience increased absenteeism due to stress-related illnesses such as psychosomatic disorders or depression [21–23].

Civilian employees in the military are also at risk of burnout due to limited opportunities for promotion, routine, low pay, and lack of support. High time pressure and limited flexibility lead to frustration and reduced commitment, which negatively affects the effectiveness of the organization [4,3,13].

Mróz's research has shown that the collaborative style is the most preferred management model [9]. A new research tool, SFZ, has enabled a thorough diagnosis of the relationship between personality traits and preferences in leadership styles. This theory allows leaders to be better matched to their roles in the organization and identifies areas for improvement. Contemporary management should be based on a flexible approach, tai-

lored to the specific nature of the team, organizational challenges, and changing working conditions. The collaborative style, although considered the most effective, is not always appropriate in every situation, so the conscious use of different management styles can yield the best results [6,17,18,24].

In summary, the results of professional functioning styles have a significant impact on burnout, and each of the 3 styles has its strengths and weaknesses and depends on the context, and needs of the organization. With this knowledge, leaders can better manage their teams, supporting the professional development of employees and the achievement of organizational goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research conducted in the rarely studied military environment allow the conclusion that professional activity, understood as involvement in professional development and participation in organizational life, can have a variety of effects on the level of burnout. On the one hand, higher activity may be associated with greater resistance to stress; on the other hand, it may lead to overload with responsibilities.

The military environment, with its rigid hierarchy and strong discipline, favors the adoption of an authoritarian style as the dominant one [14,25]. However, for civilian employees who operate according to different professional patterns, overly authoritarian management can be a source of frustration and stress. This fact is confirmed by the studies presented in the theoretical part, which pointed to the inadequacy of authoritarian management methods in environments requiring flexibility and cooperation.

The results obtained lead to conclusions about the need for more conscious human resource management in military environments [20,26,27]. The introduction of burnout prevention programs, interpersonal communication training, and the development of a culture of cooperation could significantly reduce organizational stress and improve the well-being of both soldiers and civilian employees. It seems particularly important to promote management styles based on trust, dialogue, and participation in decision-making [12,28,29].

In summary, these analyses emphasize the importance of professional functioning styles (studied with a new tool) in shaping the level of burnout in the military environment, which is so rarely the subject of psychological analysis. It points to the need to adapt the manage-

ment style to the specific nature of the professional group and the need to implement preventive measures and support the well-being of employees, which in the long term may contribute to increased organizational effectiveness and job satisfaction among soldiers and civilian employees.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Research concept:** Barbara Mróz

**Research methodology:** Barbara Mróz

**Collecting material:** Aleksandra Breguła-Wyras

**Statistical analysis:** Aleksandra Breguła-Wyras, Barbara Mróz

**Interpretation of results:** Barbara Mróz, Aleksandra Breguła-Wyras

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