

Invitation

You are cordially invited to the public defence to obtain the joint academic degree of

**DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ECONOMICS
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY**

by Philippe Sterkens

“The burnout aftermath: Stigma as a persistent threat to (re-) employment”

Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Stijn Baert and Prof. Dr. Eva Deraus

Tuesday, the 30th of April 2024 at 18h

In room ‘Ceremoniezaal’, Campus Aula, Voldersstraat 9, 9000 Ghent

Please confirm your attendance no later than the 10th of April

by completing the following form: <https://event.ugent.be/registration/DefensePhilippe>

Do not hesitate to contact Philippe if you have any questions: Philippe.Sterkens@UGent.be

EXAMINATION BOARD

Prof. Dr. Kris Boudt
Chair, Ghent University

Prof. Dr. Stijn Baert
Supervisor, Ghent University

Prof. Dr. Eva Deraus
Supervisor, Ghent University

Prof. Dr. Bert Weijters
Ghent University

Dr. Louis Lippens
Ghent University

Prof. Dr. Eva Van Belle
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Prof. Dr. Evelien Brouwers
Tilburg University

Abstract

“If you were grappling with burnout and had to re-enter the job market due to a previously unsustainable work situation, how would employers receive you? Are they inclined to offer you opportunities, or does a history of burnout cast doubt on your career prospects? Throughout my doctoral thesis, it will become clear that attaining sustainable re-employment after a burnout is anything but a walk in the park. Perhaps the burnout aftermath comes with challenges that we might have underestimated in the past...”

While there is plenty of research on the definition, prevalence and causes of burnout, very little is known about what happens to workers ‘post burnout’. More specifically, while society is confronted with a growing numbers of long-term absenteeism due to burnout, scholars possess little knowledge on the challenges inherent to return to work following burnout. To address this profound gap in the literature, this interdisciplinary dissertation tackles one barrier faced by workers returning to work, namely, labour market stigmatisation.

In this doctoral dissertation, my co-authors and I present a cohesive series of six experimental studies complemented by two descriptive surveys on barriers to re-employment (*Appendix Study 1*) and burnout disclosure (*Appendix Study 2*). First, we consider re-employment through the eyes of the formerly burned-out worker. In the pre-recruitment stage, we analyse the distinctions in job preferences between those who have experienced burnout and those who have not (*Study 1*). Second, transitioning to the viewpoint of employers, we test whether burned-out workers are penalised in the hiring context (*Study 2*). Subsequent experiments then underscore the persistence of discrimination barriers. More concretely, we explore the repercussions of disclosing a history of burnout on employers' decisions related to promotions (*Study 3*) and layoffs (*Study 4*). Notably, our findings suggest that burnout penalties may possess enduring and unalterable characteristics, as attempts to counteract stereotypes could not mitigate the penalties. The dissertation concludes by evaluating two strategies aimed at addressing the first barrier of hiring discrimination. The fifth experiment underscores the ineffectiveness of applying for positions of underemployment, which even exacerbates the burnout penalty (*Study 5*). From the sixth and final experiment, we learn that applying to organisations characterised by a caring ethical climate holds promise as a strategy to circumvent hiring discrimination against burned-out workers (*Study 6*).

The implications of this dissertation extend to both practitioners and scholars. For individuals with a history of burnout, our findings underscore the potential of job coaching. Policymakers are encouraged to monitor discrimination and the sustainable reintegration of burned-out individuals. Inclusive employers are suggested to reconsider job design, structure selection procedures, and consider their organisational climate when accommodating the needs of formerly burned-out workers. Future research may advance this domain by exploring the contextual nuances of discrimination, alternative manifestations of burnout (self-)stigma, and integrating insights from the interdisciplinary vignette literature.

Curriculum vitae

Philippe Sterkens (°1996, Brasschaat) obtained his Master's degree Industrial and Organisational Psychology in 2019 at Ghent University. Following his studies, he started his career as a doctoral researcher at the Department of Economics at Ghent University. His research is focused on labour market stigmatisation and well-being and is interdisciplinary in nature.

Philippe presented his research at several international conferences, among which the European Association of Labour Economists 2021 & 2022 conferences (2021: Barcelona, Spain; 2022: Padova, Italy) and the 2022 European Congress of Psychology (Ljubljana, Slovenia). He also presented his work on various occasions on social and traditional media, including newspapers and radio. Four studies of his PhD thesis have already been published in *Economics & Human Biology*, *Over.Werk*, *Journal of Population Economics* and *European Sociological Review*. Outside his PhD Thesis, Philippe has co-authored studies in *PLOS ONE* (2x), *The European Journal of Health Economics* (2x), *Disability and Rehabilitation*, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken* and *Economic Behavior & Organization*.