Burnout and Stress in the Library Workplace

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Abstract

The concept of job burnout has emerged over the last forty years, but not until the mid-1980s did several articles appear discussing the concepts of burnout and stress as it relates to the library profession. This literature review covers the concept of job burnout and stress in the library profession, sources and symptoms, organizational approaches and strategies, studies investigating job burnout and stress of library employees, and responses to handling job burnout and stress. For some library staff, including bibliographic instruction librarians, public service and technical service staff, burnout is evident and is not a problem exclusive to U.S. libraries. Library organizations can help their employees by recognizing the symptoms of burnout (including time pressure, conflicting demands, and lack of feedback) and helping employees cope with job stress. Individuals can reduce their job stress by, among other responses, having a social support system, leaving work at work, and asking for help.

*Keywords:* Burnout, job stress, organizational structure, stress management, library
Burnout and Stress in the Library Workplace

Job burnout and stress are not unique concepts to any profession, but for many years, no one attributed these concepts to the library profession. Since the mid-1980s, however, there were several studies conducted and articles written about burnout and stress in the library profession, how these concepts affect library staff, and what libraries are doing to help individuals cope. This literature review discusses burnout and stress concepts, sources and symptoms, organizational approaches and strategies, studies, and responses individuals can do to alleviate or reduce the possibility of suffering from burnout and stress.

Concepts and Definitions

The concept of job burnout has emerged over the last forty years and is defined as a “psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 399). Many authors consider continued stress (Bunge, 1989; Togia, 2005; Ferriero and Powers, 1982) as part of the sources leading to burnout. In the mid-1980s several articles appeared discussing the concepts of burnout and stress as it relates to the library profession. Bunge (1989) discusses the elements of stress as a response from within a person (and may differ person to person) and a person’s perception about a given situation which determines whether the situation is stressful. Bunge continues that, “managing the amount and nature of stress in one’s life consists of attempting to achieve a balance between the challenges and demands of one’s life and the resources available to meet these challenges” (p. 93). Harwell (2013) sees exhaustion as a key component of burnout. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), major contributors to this topic, see the components of burnout as

- cynicism/detachment;
- exhaustion; and
• a sense of ineffectiveness/lack of accomplishment.

Neville (1981) sees three major issues involving stress as

• the individual’s ability to handle a stressful occupation;

• influences between the individual and the organization; and

• fragmented professional support.

Sources and Symptoms

Work and information overload are sources of stress, which many authors see as leading to burnout. “Reference librarians report feelings of inadequacy regarding their knowledge of information sources and technology” (Bunge, 1989, p. 95). Ferriero and Powers (1982) indicate inflexibility as a source of burnout when library procedures are followed to the letter instead of using one’s own judgment in certain situations. Harwell (2013) lists job sources of burnout as

• high workload;

• time pressure;

• conflicting demands;

• lack of adequate information;

• lack of social support; and

• lack of feedback.

Harwell (2008) sees a source of burnout and stress as a mismatch “between people and their jobs” (p. 381). Maslach et al. (2001) indicate sources of burnout come from both individual and situational factors (workload, control, reward, community, job isolation, fairness, and values). Siamian et al. (2006) take the view that some stress is positive and “can inspire and motivate” (p. 263). Togia (2005) views bibliographic instruction librarians as the most
vulnerable to burnout based on role conflict and job ambiguity, leading to exhaustion and
depersonalization.

Topper (2007) sees sources of stress coming from “overload of work due to short
staffing” (p. 562). The author states, “with public service staff, it is never having enough time to
spend with patrons and with technical services staff it is never seeing their processing shelves
empty” (p. 562). Vijayakumar and Remy (2013) state stress “is not a problem of ‘hard’ people,
but a problem of ‘difficult’ (unsolved) situations in relationships as well as in the structure of
interpersonal relations, unclear social determination of social positions and roles, lack of
emotional support on the side of colleagues and leadership” (p. 234). Bunge (1989) discusses
that lack of office space and privacy can contribute to burnout and stress. “Libraries usually
reserve the most attractive spaces … for patron-use areas, leaving less attractive space for staff”
(p. 96). He continues that

organizational strategies can be grouped into several categories including: (1)
reducing the number and intensity of stressors, (2) strengthening the employees’
ability to cope with stress effectively, and (3) recognizing and assisting those who
are not coping effectively and who are at risk of burnout. The goal of such
strategies is not the complete elimination of stress or strain but rather the
maintenance of stress at a level with which individuals can cope effectively and
productively (p. 97).

Emanating from the sources of stress, certain symptoms indicating burnout and stress
emerge. According to Ferriero and Powers (1982), these include

- exhaustion – emotional and physical;
- attendance – sporadic;
- inflexibility – not shaping outcome to particular instance;
- lack of positive feedback - especially at reference desk;
- expectations - about own performance and lack of control over procedures; and

**Organizational Approaches and Strategies**

Libraries have different approaches to dealing with burnout and stress. Neville (1981) indicates that stress and coping with stress is closely related to the organizational structure. Levels of ambiguity in the organization and the different activities can be sources of stress. Obstacles to service delivery is a source of stress that organizations can alleviate by reviewing service responsibilities. Neville states, “many academic libraries have determined the work-flow design by the demands of the material-oriented functions. When this is the case, feedback mechanisms do not communicate smoothly to staff . . .” (p. 145). Siamian et al. (2006) state this is not a U.S. phenomena. “The main cause of burnout among academic librarians in Israel is the profession’s low status” (p. 266).

Bunge (1989) discusses several strategies that libraries can use to deal with staff burnout and stress including

- reducing the number/intensity of stressors;  
- strengthening the employees’ ability to cope effectively; and  
- recognizing/helping those who are not coping effectively.

Bunge indicates that the goal of these strategies is to maintain a level of stress that one can cope with, not necessarily alleviate stress. Maslach et al. (2001) state that the organization must be willing to be fair and equitable in dealing with staff and workloads. A combined managerial and educational approach emphasizing building engagement with the job is necessary.
Studies

There are many studies delving into burnout and stress among library staff, mainly with regards to librarians. Harwell (2013) studies burnout and job engagement among business librarians. A significant number of study participants (one in seven librarians) were suffering from burnout. Harwell (2008) points out that “library work involves specific stressors found in few other work environments” (p. 384). Juniper, Bellamy, and White (2011) conduct a well-being study in southern England of public libraries and find public library staff feel there is a correlation between the work they do and their well-being. Nelson (1987) conducts a study of law librarians and concludes law librarians have lower stress levels but do experience symptoms of burnout (lack of opportunities, etc.).

Siamian et al. (2006) investigate the reasons and signs of burnout in librarians. They find 43 percent of their participants suffer from job burnout noting those with higher educational degrees suffer more from burnout and stress. Togia (2005) studies Greek academic librarians and find “low levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and moderate levels of personal accomplishment” (p. 134). Togia did indicate the examined sample (academic librarians) is a limitation of the study. Wood (1989) examines stress among academic librarians in different job positions and did not find a significant difference in stress levels between academic librarians by position or by the source of stress.

Responses

Managing stress and responding to burnout is important for individuals and libraries. Bunge (1989) states the first step to managing stress is to gain knowledge of how stress occurs. Individuals need an effective social support system and skill at expressing feelings and feedback. Managers need to be able to recognize the symptoms of burnout and stress and learn the
appropriate ways to help. DelGuidice (2011) indicates ways a school librarian can avoid burnout including

- attending conferences and workshops (for professional development);
- learning to say no to too many extracurricular activities;
- learning to let go of things once you leave work for the day;
- ask for help; and
- reach out to colleagues.

For reference librarians, Ferriero and Powers (1982) add fostering teamwork, utilizing private spaces, and effectively using staff meetings. Harwell (2008) emphasizes the importance of involvement of family, community, and other connections outside of the work environment. Neville (1981) sees libraries in the future must “recognize the shift from a materials orientation to a client orientation and design the organization structure to serve the work flow of library services” (p. 246) and reduce the potential for burnout. Sheesley (2001) discusses methods in the classroom to help the teaching librarian (dynamic sessions, collaboration, new approaches, etc.) and outside the classroom (coping strategies, setting goals, recognition, and support).

Topper (2007) indicates reducing stress involves seeking more information about the situation (which provides some personal control). She also sees physical exercise, taking a break or lunch away from work, and brightening the work environment with pictures as responses/strategies for reducing stress. Vijayakumar and Remy (2013) see new employee orientations and learning opportunities important strategies for the library to help reduce stress for their employees.
Conclusion

Burnout and stress can happen in any work environment, even libraries. Articles and studies regarding job burnout and stress in the library profession indicate a correlation between the library work environment and burnout and stress. Sources and symptoms of burnout and stress are inherent in the customer service oriented environment library staff work in. Library staff should become aware of the sources of burnout and stress and learn responses to these stressors. Library organizations are able to adjust their structure in order to assist their employees in coping, and this is probably the most important aspect in dealing with burnout and stress. Organizations need to be aware and adjust their organizational culture in order to supply their employees with the tools necessary to cope with stress and reduce the incidence of burnout.
References


