

Research Notes

Burnout: A Survey of Academic Reference Librarians

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INTRODUCTION

Cherniss defined burnout as "psychological withdrawal from work in response to excessive stress or dissatisfaction."¹ Freudenberger found that typically, the worker's thinking became rigid; the employee became stubborn and inflexible and appeared depressed. At the same time, the distressed staff member tended to spend more and more time at the job.² Gann states that

... a major cause of burning-out for new public sector professionals is disillusionment as a result of unrealistic expectations derived from the "professional mystique." This myth, although not uniformly inaccurate, generally leads new professionals to believe their work situations will be (among other things) interesting, quite autonomous, collegial, and filled with grateful and cooperative clients. It also proposes that the professional will feel competent (once acquiring the proper credentials), sympathetic, and compassionate at all times.³

Other factors which have been ascribed as causal are exhaustion, boredom, disappointment, stagnation, frustration, or apathy. An employee can become so overwhelmed that service to the public becomes ineffectual and indifferent.

The results of burnout can be costly to an institution or to the individual worker. The consequences most often attributed to burnout are low staff morale, job absenteeism, high turnover, and problems at

home. An abundance of research has indicated that reactions to stressful work situations may also include headaches, problems with sleeping, gastrointestinal disturbances, ulcers, back problems, aggravation of allergies, increased frequency of illnesses such as colds and flu, and more. Besides the physical exhaustion which is characterized by low energy, chronic fatigue and weariness, a worker may also experience emotional and mental exhaustion which promotes feelings of depression, helplessness, hopelessness, and entrapment.

A helping profession is especially susceptible to burnout. Teachers do it; social workers do it; nurses do it. What about librarians? They help people in a helping profession too.

Because statistical studies have not assessed the degree of burnout for the library profession,⁴ we have undertaken this study. To answer the question, Is there a correlation between a degree of burnout which may be experienced by full-time, academic reference librarians and certain selected factors? reference librarians in seventy-five selected U.S. universities were surveyed. Only universities whose enrollment exceeded 20,000 were chosen. Determination of enrollment and addresses were obtained from the *American Libraries Directory*.

Five questionnaires were sent to each of

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the seventy-five universities in care of the head reference librarian, who was asked to randomly distribute them to full-time professionals at the general reference or other reference areas. Because the supposition was that the general reference area was more stressful, preference was to test that group. If there were not five general reference librarians, other reference librarians were tested, rather than discarding the questionnaires. A designation for work area was included with the questions.

Questionnaires were coded by school to assist record keeping on returns, however, strictest confidence was maintained for all respondents.

QUESTIONNAIRE

A three-page questionnaire was used which identified possible areas of burnout and the implications to the library and the librarians. The questionnaire included open and close-ended statements, scale items, and was divided into four major areas.

The first area concerned job characteristics and included questions about number of full-time and part-time employees, rating the job, working directly with patrons, vacations, decompression time, input into library policy, and professional development.

The second part focused on personal questions: hobbies, pets, health problems, exercise program, and religion.

The third area dealt with background information and included questions about age, gender, marital status, education and years of library experience.

The fourth section of the questionnaire was the Forbes' Burnout Survey.* Responses on the survey were ranked from one to four. From the sum total, on the survey, one of the following was selected as a burnout category for each respondent: 71-80, "Have burnout;" 61-70, "Mild burnout;" 51-60, "Some warning

signs, candidate for burnout;" or 20-50, "Good balance."

PRETEST

With the permission of Randy Olsen from the Harold B. Lee Library's Director's Office, the pretest questionnaire was administered to all full-time professional librarians employed by Brigham Young University. Of the sixty-seven questionnaires distributed, fifty-seven, or 85 percent, were returned. Several recommendations were made for revision, and items in the questionnaire found to be ambiguous, misleading, or otherwise inappropriate were changed or eliminated from the final version. A test, retest reliability check of the burnout scores after a five-month interval using twenty-five randomly selected pretest participants for the posttest, yielded a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.83$, however, a paired t -test using MINITAB gave a $t = 3.972$, calculated alpha level = 0.0006, indicating a significant difference between the two means for the two tests.

Data gathered from the final survey were processed using the frequencies, cross-tabulations, and the Spearman Correlation Coefficient from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

SUMMARY

Of 380 questionnaires distributed, 262 were returned and usable, giving a return rate of 69 percent. Although generally a very favorable return rate, because of the nature of this study the nonrespondents may have had a profound impact on the results of the study.

The analysis performed on the data indicated there was not a strong correlation between the degree of burnout experienced by professional librarians and the selected factors studied (See table 1). The seven factors most strongly correlated with the burnout score (all of which were significant at $p < 0.001$) were control of stress in one's life ($r = 0.44$), gastrointesti-

*This measurement was designed and copyrighted by Dr. Rosalind Forbes of Forbes Associates Stress Consultants, 477 Madison Avenue, New York City, NY 10022. The test was used in this study with Dr. Forbes' permission.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS WITH BURNOUT SCORES

Variable	Spearman's Coefficient	Calculated Alpha level
<i>Job Characteristics</i>		
How challenging is your job	.10	.052
Do you like working with patrons	.09	.072
How many days vacation taken per year	-.01	.471
Regular decompression time after work	.08	.103
How much input do you have into library policy	.19	.001
Pressure to publish, do research, continue education	-.04	.262
How successful are you in your job	.28	.001
Do you want to be on same job in 10 years	.20	.001
<i>Personal</i>		
Hobbies	-.05	.235
Pets	.10	.129
Headaches	-.29	.001
Sleeplessness	-.29	.001
Ulcers	-.11	.061
Colds	-.06	.188
Flu	-.16	.010
Allergies	-.14	.016
Gastrointestinal disturbances	-.31	.001
Back problems	-.22	.001
Exercise regularly	-.13	.017
Time spent exercising	-.13	.029
How important to you is religion	.09	.081
How well do you handle stress	.44	.001
<i>Background Information</i>		
Age Category	-.09	.076
Sex	-.15	.008
Marital status	-.01	.413
Ordinal position in family	.03	.310
Education	-.08	.093
Years in present job	-.04	.262
Years library experience	-.04	.260

nal disturbances ($r = 0.3$), headaches ($r = 0.3$), sleeplessness ($r = 0.3$), success on the job ($r = 0.28$), back problems ($r = 0.22$), and job ten years from now ($r = 0.2$).

No questionnaires scored in the 70s, "burnout," but five scored in the 60s, "mild burnout," or 2 percent of those surveyed (See figure 1).

Job Characteristics

The low correlation between challenge of the job and burnout score suggests academic reference librarians enjoy the stimulation of the job and are meeting the challenges presented. Another indication of job satisfaction was the 95 percent positive response to working directly with patrons.

Librarians averaged eighteen vacation days per year, and 76 percent participated in rejuvenating and nonjob-oriented activities, such as travel and visiting friends and relatives. Other research has shown that professionals who regularly take earned time off were better able to handle stress.

Our data suggested lack of input into library policy and pressure to publish caused little stress. However, in reviewing the five returns with the highest burnout scores, all showed the respondent had little input into library policy. Also, all five indicated expectations of publishing.

Thirty-two percent of respondents felt they were highly successful in their present job. However, 52 percent indicated they did not wish to remain on the

TABLE 2

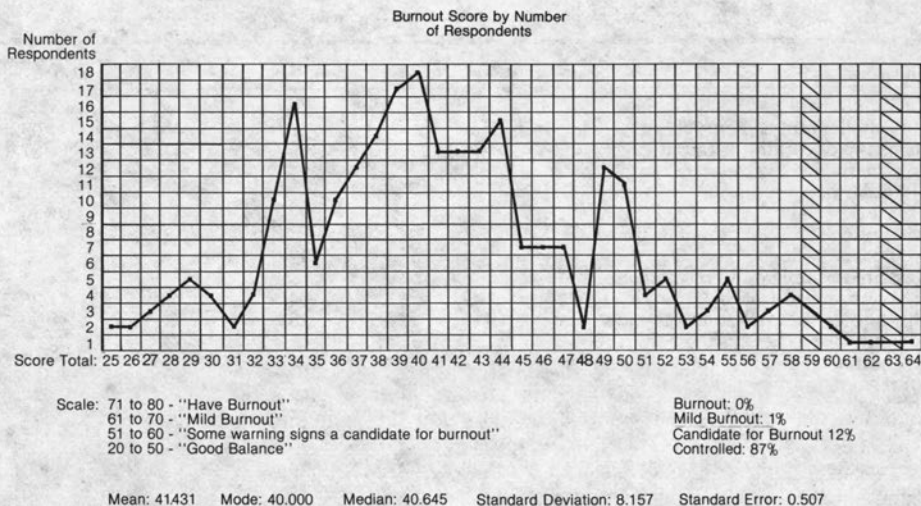


FIGURE 1
 Burnout Score by Number of Respondents

same job ten years from now. Perhaps this is an indication of desired growth and development. Also, a small number of the 52 percent anticipated retirement within that time frame. Again, if one considered only the top five burnout scores, a different picture emerged. Of those five most in danger of burnout, three said they definitely did not wish to be in the same job in ten years. One felt overworked and underpaid but didn't know what other work to do. The fifth didn't know, but indicated this was the fifth job in twelve years, and although presently unhappy, should maybe stay with the job.

Personal

The enthusiastic response to hobbies was perhaps a healthy indication of a well-balanced life. A wide variety of interests were represented, as most of the participants listed more than one hobby. Hobbies have been recommended frequently in the literature as a preventative for burnout. In this study, most librarians listed one or more hobbies regardless of their burnout score—even the five highest scorers. This indicated that although having a hobby may be helpful, it was not enough to prevent burnout.

Burnouts often experience recurring health problems. The significant levels of headaches, sleeplessness, gastrointestinal disturbances and back problems corroborated this tendency, as they correlated positively to a high burnout score. Other researchers list ulcers, colds, flu, and allergies as being frequent concerns, however, they were not significant in this study.

A low correlation for exercise and burnout was unexpected. Indeed, most experts recommend exercise to prevent burnout. The questionnaires revealed that many who had low burnout scores did exercise. But the librarian with the highest burnout score (64), indicated performance of an exercise program of three to five hours per week. Perhaps more exercise time was needed, or maybe exercise alone was not a sufficient preventative of burnout.

The question about the importance of religion was included because of Freudenberg's comment: "A big reason our lives are more difficult today and more prone to burnout is our repudiation of religion and the buffers it provides for dealing with uncomfortable issues and situations."⁵ This was not a factor of significance for the librarians surveyed.

The open-ended question, other stress

categories, revealed two characteristics correlated with high burnout scores. They were: first, the lack of money for the library and/or personal needs, and second—and perhaps the key to understanding burnout in librarians—the lack of time to do all that *had* to be done or that they *wanted* to do. More will be said about this in the conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Academic reference librarians do not seem to be especially prone to burnout—why?

In 1976 the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health listed librarianship in a group of ten least stressful jobs in the United States.⁶ A Metropolitan Life Insurance Company study found that "librarians, curators, political leaders, government officials, and community leaders enjoy the longest life."⁷ Librarians, in general, seem to be well satisfied with their profession. Morrison observed that librarians are considerably less prone to express dissatisfaction with their occupational choice than other professional groups.⁸

A number of studies have found that a large majority of librarians indicated a desire to remain in their profession. Stone discovered that those who wished to leave librarianship "had published more articles, belonged to more learned societies, had done more research, [and] had a higher sense of professionalism." Their main reason to leave was a "desire to make fuller use of their capabilities and potential."⁹

For many, librarianship is their second profession. White and Macklin found that

... only a quarter of the students entered a library school directly from their undergraduate studies, and nearly two-thirds had worked in another field of work before attending library school. . . . Most of the respondents indicated dissatisfaction with earlier employment or family reasons as the motivation for moving into the library field¹⁰

Perhaps many librarians experienced burnout in another profession before becoming librarians, thus learned to cope with stress.

... while burnout can be an extraordinarily painful and distressing experience, as with any difficult event, if properly handled it can not only be overcome, it can be the first step toward increased self-awareness, enriched human understanding, and a precursor of important life changes, growth, and development.¹¹

Perhaps librarians have learned to make reasonable expectations of themselves. Freudenberger says:

Not every personality is susceptible to Burn-Out. It would be virtually impossible for the underachiever to get into that state. . . . Burn-Out is pretty much limited to dynamic, charismatic, goal-oriented men and women or to determined idealists who want their marriages to be the best, their work records to be outstanding, their children to shine, their community to be better. These are the people who are dedicated and committed to whatever they undertake.¹²

This quote may contain the explanation as to why a few librarians showed early signs of burnout, in spite of the fact that they had hobbies, exercised, and followed other preventative measures. These few librarians have not learned to relax. Over-achievers will never have enough time to accomplish their high expectations for the library or themselves. In order for the overly enthusiastic, idealistic librarian to be satisfied with the efforts expended, the results must be perfect. He/she must be the perfect librarian in the perfect library. And that is not all. In his/her personal life, perfection is expected as well. For example, if the librarian is also a wife, mother, jogger, or chairperson of a community organization, she feels she must function perfectly and there simply is not enough time, although she pushes herself with great intensity. The inordinate energy expended eventually leads to depletion and burnout.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should concentrate on the personality of librarians who show the strongest tendency to burnout. Very possibly the injunction to know oneself will be the primary preventive measure for burnout.

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