Role-related Stress Experienced by Academic Librarians

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ABSTRACT

Although a substantial body of research has identified stressors and their consequences in a number of organizational populations, very little systematic research has investigated the stress experienced by librarians. The study described here addresses this oversight by examining two sources of role-related stress experienced in a diverse sample of academic librarians. Results of the study were largely consistent with predictions. The librarians experienced role ambiguity, role overload, and burnout at or above the level experienced by other occupational samples, and the role stressors significantly predicted an array of psychological, health-related, and work-related outcomes. Implications of the results for the prevention of role stress and interventional programs are discussed.

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A recent nationwide survey suggests that a majority of Americans regularly experience moderate or high levels of stress. Among the particularly potent and widespread causes of this stress are work and work-related responsibilities, with 70% of respondents citing their jobs as a significant source of stress (APA, 2013). Although experiencing the feelings of stress and anxiety is clearly unpleasant, the implications of work-related problems extend beyond this negative subjective experience. Indeed, research has repeatedly shown stress to be related to a number of undesirable, deleterious consequences. The fact that many organizations now offer employee assistance programs to manage or prevent stress suggests that they are increasingly acknowledging the consequences, both for their employees and for their own financial well-being (e.g., Bhagat, Steverson, & Segovis, 2007).

Stressors associated with employee roles have long captured the interest of researchers and continue to represent one of the most widely studied sources of occupational stress. Unfortunately, however, while researchers have sought to better understand role-related stress in a number of populations, the experiences of academic librarians have been virtually ignored. Although it is difficult to explain the dearth of research, it is likely related to assumptions of the scientific community regarding the nature of the librarian's job as relatively static and undemanding. The lack of research on academic librarians is surprising, in light of recent changes in the nature of their work, making role-related stress especially timely and relevant (see Shupe & Pung, 2011, for a review). The purpose of the study described here is to address this oversight by assessing two common role-related stressors and examining their ability to predict a number of psychological, health-related, and work-related variables in a diverse sample of academic librarians.

THEORY AND RESEARCH AND THEORY ON ROLE-RELATED STRESSORS

More than fifty years ago, Kahn applied the concept of role-related stress to the workplace in what has become one of the most often cited works in the organizational psychology literature (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). According to his organizational role theory, positions within organizations are associated with implicitly understood and explicitly communicated expectations, limitations, and requirements (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Although the delineation of these roles can be beneficial to both the individuals and the organization, they can also be a source of significant stress.

One of the most damaging sources of role stress is role overload, experienced when individuals perceive their jobs to be excessively demanding, requiring them to work very hard, very long, and/or very fast (Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011). A second commonly experienced and challenging role-related stressor is role ambiguity, which results from unclear expectations about specific job-related responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964). Role ambiguity tends to be particularly problematic for new hires, in boundary-spanning positions, and in organizations involving frequent changes in technology or organizational structure and, like role overload, leads to a host of negative consequences. Since Kahn's initial work, researchers have conducted a steady stream of research on role stress, and the now substantial body of research shows that role ambiguity and overload

are pervasive across a wide variety of job types, organizations, and cultures and lead to a host of deleterious effects.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF STRESS

The prevalence and severity of role stress can perhaps best be understood by considering the balance of role-related demands and resources available to help meet the demands (e.g., Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). A number of theories focus on this interplay between role demands and resources. According to Karasek's demand–control model, for example, demanding jobs are likely to result in stressor-based strain when the work load, time pressure, and other demands are not matched with control necessary to manage the demands (Karasek, 1979). Thus, the model predicts that individuals in jobs characterized by high demands and low control are most likely to suffer from job stress. Like Karasek's model, Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources model highlights the importance of available resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2011). However, it also emphasizes the motivational role of resources, with individuals striving to "obtain, retain, foster, and protect those things they centrally value" (Hobfoll, 2011, p. 117), made possible in large part by their own and collectively available resources. Because they play a key motivational role, the actual or anticipated loss of resources causes individuals to experience stress, as does a failure to experience expected resource gains.

Conceptualizing stress in the context of resources is particularly useful in understanding role overload, which involves a loss or potential loss of time and energy, in addition to the potential loss of other intrinsic and extrinsic resources, such as self-confidence and organizational rewards. A focus on resources is also useful in understanding the stress resulting from role ambiguity. One manifestation of role ambiguity is a lack of relevant information necessary to perform role-related duties (e.g., O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). This form of role ambiguity is clearly tied to resources, with information deficiency representing the absence or loss of a highly valued resource. A second manifestation of role ambiguity, unpredictable consequences, is more relevant to theories focusing on the inherent stressfulness of uncertainty. According to Beehr and Bhagat's uncertainty model of occupational stress, for example, stress is largely a function of the amount and duration of the uncertainty related to desired outcomes (e.g., Beehr & Bhagat, 1985). According to this uncertainty model, role ambiguity would make it more difficult to determine whether one's efforts will lead to successful performance.

IMPLICATIONS OF EXPERIENCING ROLE-RELATED STRESS

Like other occupational stressors, role overload and ambiguity are often studied within a stressor–strain framework. The role stressors are generally conceptualized as antecedents of the negative psychological experience of stress, and this stress predicts work-related, psychological, and/or health-related consequences or strains (e.g., Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Nixon et al., 2011). Using this general framework, researchers have shown that role ambiguity and overload are pervasive and, like other stressors, result in a number of negative consequences for the employees and organizations. Employees experiencing role overload or ambiguity, for example, are more likely to develop negative job attitudes, such as decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006, 2010). They are also more likely to experience disengagement from their job or to indicate intentions to quit, in part due to the decreased commitment (e.g., Glazer & Beehr, 2005). Finally, employees experiencing role ambiguity or overload are more likely to suffer from psychological consequences including tension, decreased life satisfaction, depression, and burnout (e.g., Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Ortqvist & Wincent, 2010) and to suffer from cardiovascular problems and other health related symptoms (Nixon et al., 2011), even when they do not

appraise the role stressor as a problem (Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011).

ROLE AMBIGUITY AND ROLE OVERLOAD IN LIBRARIANS

Research examining role stress and its consequences has generally been the domain of researchers in psychology, organizational behavior, and other related disciplines. Although their studies have examined a wide range of occupations, surprisingly little attention has been given to professional librarians. Not surprisingly, however, librarians have long recognized the inherent stressfulness of their profession (e.g., Jordan, 2014). Many of their writings have been prescriptive in nature, providing information about how to recognize, prevent, and cope with stress (e.g., Jordan, 2014). In one article, for example, authors offer tips for identifying and coping with the inherent stressfulness of being a librarian, while other articles focus on stress changes in role-related responsibilities or a propensity for burnout in librarians and other information-based professions (Knibbe-Haanstra, 2008; McCormack & Cotter, 2013). Other articles describe the results of case studies or narrative accounts of personal experiences. For example, in an in-depth study of stress experienced by a small group of academic librarians in the United Kingdom, a number of participants described the stressfulness of being unable to determine their specific job-related responsibilities, or dealing with what they perceived to be an unmanageable workload (Farler & Broady-Preston, 2006). In a similar article, several serial librarians described stressors that they encountered in their jobs, including uncertainty associated with changes in technology and rising expectations from users (Burke, Mayo, Lener, & Mellinger, 2009). Although this descriptive literature offers rich examples and serves as a useful first step in delineating the stressors experienced by librarians, it offers little in terms of a comprehensive, systematic understanding of the stressors and their relation to important outcomes.

Large scale quantitative studies on work-related stress in librarians are surprisingly rare, and much of the existing research was conducted more than a decade ago. These studies suggest that, contrary to popular stereotypes of librarianship as a quiet, stress-free profession (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014) librarians often experience high levels of stress. In their study of reference librarians, for example, Haack and colleagues found that 42% of the librarians were at or near burnout (Haack, Jones, & Roose, 1984), and results from a study of public reference librarians showed similarly high levels of burnout (Smith & Marchant, 1984). In a later study, Affleck (1996) examined several dimensions of burnout in bibliographic instruction librarians. More than half of the librarians experienced at least one type of burnout, and the burnout was due in part to issues related to their job roles. Thus, the available research suggests that librarians in a variety of positions experience stress, resulting in part from uncertainty about expectations, the pace of the changing roles, and other role-related problems.

Like the qualitative literature described above, results from the quantitative research shed light on the stressfulness of the librarian's job and show that librarians exhibit common and often severe signs of stress, including the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization characterizing burnout. Although it also offers a useful account of the stressfulness of librarianship, it is somewhat outdated and provides only a limited understanding of the types of stressors experienced and their consequences. Thus, although the extant literature serves as a useful first step in detailing the stressfulness of librarianship, it falls short of capturing the experiences of academic librarians on a comprehensive level. The purpose of the current study is to offer a more complete understanding of the stress experienced by academic librarians, using survey methodology. It employs standard instruments to measure role ambiguity and role overload in a large sample of academic librarians and examines the relations between the role stressors and a number of common work-related and psychological symptoms. Based on theory in occupational stress, the descriptive literature on librarians,