Academic Teaching Librarian Reflections on Self-Report Burnout and Job Control Scores

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Introduction

Burnout is a pervasive problem in libraries broadly, and recent quantitative research on burnout in academic libraries has confirmed high levels of burnout among academic librarians (Wood et al., 2020). Issues in libraries related to control and autonomy caused by toxic work environments, open office plans, and micromanaging bosses may exacerbate burnout. As such, this study specifically examines burnout and job control among academic teaching librarians.

Since library workplaces are highly social and collaborative work environments and librarianship is a relatively small professional field, it's important to examine how librarians understand their working conditions in comparison to others in the field. As such, this study seeks to understand how academic teaching librarians conceptualize burnout and job control in relation to others in the profession based on professional discourse, exemplified through publications, conferences, discussion forums, and social media.

Methods

Survey

A web survey was administered to academic teaching librarians through a professional network provided by the American Library Association.
   a) The survey included Ganster's (1989) job control measure and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005). Both were measured using Likert scales with 5 response categories; but job control scores range from 1 to 5, and burnout scores range from 0 to 100.
   b) 245 academic teaching librarians participated in the survey.
   c) 105 survey participants signaled interest to participate in follow-up interviews

Interviews

Based on the survey results, participants were invited for follow-up interviews.
   a) The survey results were used to recruit participants with high and low job control. 20 participants with high job control and 19 participants with low job control participated.
   b) Surveys lasted approximately 60 minutes, and each participant received a $50 gift card.

The results presented here focus on two questions from the interview protocol. As opening, rapport-building questions, participants were presented with information about their burnout and job control scores in relation to other survey participants and then asked for their reflections. The data were analyzed with NVivo, using a combination of memoing, annotation, and coding.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for total work-related burnout score (TWRBS) and job control (Control) for all survey participants, participants selected for interviews, and low and high control interview participants.

	N	Mean		Std. Dev.		Minimum		Median		Maximum	
		TWRBS	Control	TWRBS	Control	TWRBS	Control	TWRBS	Control	TWRBS	Control
Survey Participants	245	49.87	3.33	19.42	0.52	3.57	1.86	50	3.33	100	5
Interview Participants	39	43.32	3.39	20.99	0.55	3.57	2.38	42.86	3.38	92.86	4.48
Low Control	19	51.88	2.91	19.21	0.29	25	2.38	53.57	2.9	92.86	3.29
High Control	20	35.18	3.85	19.71	0.27	3.57	3.38	32.14	3.81	75	4.48

Professional Identity & Professional Community

Academic librarianship is a fairly small professional community. In some ways, the small professional community results in positive conversations about burnout and job control or provides access to mentorship and opportunities to see different possibilities. In other cases, academic librarians might not recognize the issues in their own workplace or might brush them off because they think that's what librarianship is like. Additionally, participants had perceptions of what librarianship was like in other countries (US or Canada) and in other types of libraries (large academic, small academic, or medical), which formed even smaller professional communities (e.g., medical librarians, Canadian librarians) with even more narrow ideas of what librarianship is like.

   Regarding mentorship specifically: "But it's important to know that you're not alone, and to have somebody. . . She's [my mentor] like you just need to get out of there. And I think a lot of people don't have that outside person. And so they can get trapped in this sort of like gas lighting bubble." (Harper)

   On recognizing the issues with leadership and work culture after being away from work: "After being away, it made me realize just how bad it was. And I was, at this point, starting to look for another job again." (Lena)

   On working in a medical library: "I'm not in a large, undergraduate-serving library, so I'm not with my 35 other colleagues. It's me and and [a few] others. And the environment can be very different because we are working with clinicians who are also medical educators." (Olivia)

Toxic Work Environments

The prevalence of toxic work environments in academic libraries has generated many books, articles, presentations, blog posts, and Reddit threads. The professional discourse is saturated with examples and discussions about poor managers and toxic environments. It's possible for librarians to get the impression that all libraries are bad places to work.

   One participant (Dana) expressed surprise specifically to learn that all academic librarians weren't in the same boat with toxic work environments in relation to her low job control.

Relative Deprivation Theory

Academic teaching librarians might not feel as though they've earned the right to complain if they perceive that colleagues (real or imagined) are in worse situations than they are. As such, sometimes, participants expressed that they didn't think they were burnt out solely because they didn't have it as bad as they thought others did. Specifically, some participants who didn't think they were burnt out expressed surprise (because others have it worse) when realizing that their burnout was fairly high.

   "I definitely have a perception that it's much worse at some other places." (Clementine)

Conceptualization of Job Control & Burnout

Individual participants weighted different aspects of job control differently than others, such that, they felt they had high job control as long as they had control over the areas that were important to them. For burnout, participants frequently conflated burnout and overwork, so they might not necessarily recognize their own burnout.

Conclusions

Participants' reflections on their own burnout and job control were affected by conversations within the field, both formal and informal. As such, this study provides useful insights for considering how professional community socially constructs workplace phenomena. Even within the larger community of academic librarianship, smaller communities are formed with their own understandings of the profession and professional identity, which impact conceptions of work and workplaces.

While this study focused on a narrow group of educators (i.e., academic teaching librarians), it provides useful insights for considering how professional discourse impacts collective understanding of occupational phenomena. In small professional communities, it may be important to understand professional discourse when studying occupational phenomena.

Funding

References

Ganster, D. G. (1989). *Measurement of worker control. Final report.* (PB2005105188). Nebraska Univ.-Lincoln. Dept. of Management; National Inst. for Occupational Safety and Health, Washington, DC. https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2005105188.xhtml

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