Survey Measures Burnout In Newspaper Sports Editors

by Scott Reindary

Although the editors suffer moderate rates of burnout in terms of exhaustion and cynicism, they demonstrate high levels of professional effectiveness. Generally, they do not suffer high rates of burnout.

At the 2005 Associated Press Sports Editors convention in Orlando, Fla., the 158 participants were presented backpacks filled with trinkets. Among the trinkets was a soft, white, palm-sized ball with red stitching, resembling a baseball. It was a stress ball.

Although being a sports editor might appear to be part sports fantasy camp and part athletic groupie, the demands of working nights, weekends and holidays, being away from family, logging 50-plus hour weeks and being the brunt of criticism from overzealous sports fans can take its psychological toll. Throw in competition from 24-hour television, radio and Internet media, shrinking budgets, staff cuts and the growing sports landscape that demands newspaper coverage, and there's a recipe for stress and possibly burnout.

Additionally, sports writers and editors are often publicly and privately admonished by sources for something they have written, sometimes receiving death threats.[1] And with the advent of e-mail, sports editors are subjected to a gluttony of demoralizing messages. Lincoln (Neb.) *Journal Star* former sports editor John Mabry, who used to cover the University of Nebraska football team, said:

> I'll get an anonymous letter occasionally. It won't be threatening but it'll be just so mean-spirited you'll just want to run and hide. People just get mean.[2]

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Mabry also said it's not just the public that lashes out at sports journalists. It's also sports information personnel, athletic administrators, coaches and players.[3]

Studies have demonstrated that burnout can affect job performance,[4] job satisfaction[5] and work and family relationships,[6] which in turn can lead to employee turnover.[7] Although other newsroom editors and personnel may suffer from similar issues, this is a unique exploratory story that will specifically examine the lives of sports editors. The results of this study can act as a benchmark for additional research that examines burnout throughout the entire newsroom.

Since Maslach and Jackson[8] developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory, hundreds of studies have been conducted using the instrument to determine burnout. In assessing various aspects of burnout, Maslach and Jackson described burnout as a "syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind."[9] The MBI was developed to measure burnout among health care professionals who interact with clients or patients. Maslach and Jackson write: "For the person who works continuously with people under such circumstances, the chronic stress can be emotionally draining and can lead to burnout."[10]

In 1996, Maslach, Jackson and Leiter[11] developed the MBI-General Survey to examine the relationship an employee has with his or her work, and does not necessarily emphasize the relationship between employees and the people they encounter at work. The three components of the MBI-GS include exhaustion, cynicism and professional efficacy.

However, burnout does not suddenly rise from the work or home environment. Stress is a source of burnout, and stressors initiate stress. Emotional and mental stressors can be pleasant or unpleasant. A promotion can be just as stressful as being fired.[12] Selye, who conducted extensive research on stress and is considered by many to be the father of modern stress research, defined stress as:

> ... *the rate of wear and tear on the body. Anyone who feels that whatever he is doing – or whatever is being done to him – is strenuous and wearing, knows vaguely what we mean by stress. The feelings of just being tired, jittery, or ill are subjective sensations of stress. But stress does not necessarily imply a morbid change: normal life also causes some wear and tear in the machinery of the body.*[13]

Stressors accumulate, and how individuals react largely depends on their values, experiences and adaptability. A lone stressor can become compounded if the established support system fails.[14] For example, the stress of a sports editor rushing to meet the nightly deadline is compounded when a game goes into overtime.

Webster and Bergman[15] determined that 3,418 sufferers of occupational

stress missed on average 23 work days a year because of stress-related illnesses. The American Institute of Stress[16] reports that job stress costs U.S. businesses between $200 billion and $300 billion each year as a result of accidents, absenteeism, employee turnover, reduced productivity, medical and insurance costs and workers' compensation.

The purpose of this study is to examine the level of burnout, and the relationship between burnout and possible stressors such as overall job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, work-family conflict and role overload, among 184 sports editors working at small, medium and large circulation newspapers throughout the United States.

Although in 2005 the Centers for Disease Control listed journalists seventh among the top 10 most stressful jobs,[17] only a few stress and burnout studies have been conducted involving journalists. In self-reported surveys, journalists have said they have suffered from some stress-related health problems,[18] described their jobs as "highly stressful,"[19] and that journalists are susceptible to burnout.[20] Some of the contributing factors to stress and burnout in those studies include meeting newspaper deadlines, pressure to produce good work, low pay, media competition, long hours, implementing new technology and time away from family.[21]

During the past 25 years, hundreds of studies have used the MBI. Schaufeli and Enzmann[22] report that between 1976 and 1996, 581 of 637 (91.2 percent) burnout studies in dissertations utilized the MBI. In examining 498 journal articles during the same time period, 93 percent referred to the MBI.[23]

With subscales of the MBI-GS, exhaustion has items that include references to fatigue related to the work. Cynicism measures apathy or an aloof attitude toward work. Professional efficacy is a feeling of accomplishment and competence in doing the job and focuses on an employee's expectations of his or her own work.[24]

Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter[25] identified six areas of worklife related to burnout. Those areas include work overload, control of job resources to do the job properly, a lack of reward for a job well done, social support of work colleagues, perceived fairness of rewards and punishments and a conflict of personal and job values. Maslach et al., wrote:

> *What started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless. Energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness.*[26]

For newspaper journalists, a certain amount of stress is an acceptable by-product of the job. Built-in stressors include the physical anxiety of deadlines, unusual hours and excessively long workdays. Emotional stressors provide a supplementary element of fear (of getting scooped), joy (of getting the scoop), anger (of being ignored by sources), competition (with other reporters and other media) and conflicts (when chasing a controversial story).

Giles' study[27] examined stress among 544 newspaper editors and determined that while stressors such as deadlines and pressure to produce a good newspaper were prevalent, the editors were more stimulated than frustrated by them. The study also revealed that the most stressful aspect for editors was the decline in journalistic quality as the result of staff shortages, pressure from outside influences and economic interests.[28]

But when stress continues to build, it can lead to burnout. In an examination of five daily newspapers, Cook and Banks[29] learned that copy editors showed significantly higher levels of burnout than did reporters. The most susceptible for burnout are young, inexperienced journalists who are multitasking on the copy desk and working at a small newspapers. The "at-risk" journalist receives a below-average salary, intends to leave the profession, has discovered that journalism is much different than expected and has low job satisfaction.[30]

Cook, Banks and Turner[31] explored the effects of work environment factors on burnout among 120 daily newspaper reporters and copy editors, and discovered that older subjects demonstrated significantly lower levels of burnout, and copy editors had significantly higher levels of burnout compared with reporters.

Sports editors appear to be prime candidates for high degrees of stress and burnout. In his study of burnout among sports journalists, Reinardy[32] reported that sports editors suffered higher rates of burnout than sports writers or desk personnel. This study continues to build on previous research by not only examining burnout of sports editors but the stressors that might contribute or diminish burnout, including overall job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, work-family conflict and role overload.

Burnout develops through incremental stages, with the lynchpin being exhaustion. Once an employee experiences exhaustion, cynicism will develop, leaving efficacy as the lone counterbalance preventing burnout.[33] Studies have shown that overall job satisfaction can bolster efficacy and assist in moderating stress and burnout.[34]

The three-decade study of Weaver and Wilhoit et al. documented the decline in job satisfaction among American journalists from 1971 (49 percent) to 2002 (33.3 percent).[35] Although the Weaver and Wilhoit study asked a lone question,[36] they determined that organizational editorial policies (66.8 percent), job security (62 percent), chance to help people (58.3 percent) and amount of autonomy (52.9 percent) were the leading influences on job satisfaction.[37] In the most recent study, Weaver et al. examined significant predictors of job satisfaction. They reported that journalists were more satisfied in their jobs if they believed their newspaper attempted to keep morale high and wanted to improve the quality of journalism.[38]

In measuring the perceptions of overall job satisfaction, this study includes a portion of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire developed by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins and Klesh.[39] Cammann et al. said overall job satisfaction was established "to provide an indication of the organization members' overall affective responses to their jobs."[40]

As previous studies have demonstrated, perceived organizational support can also assist in diminishing elements of burnout.[41] The ideology of organizational commitment was the basis for Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa's[42] pursuit in developing a scale to measure employees' perceptions of organizational support (POS). Specifically, Eisenberger et al. wanted to examine an individual's dedication to an organization and the factors that might influence that dedication.

While job satisfaction and organizational support assist in offsetting stressors that lead to burnout, conflict between work and family and work overload are contributors.

Netemeyer, Boles and Mc-Murrian[43] developed a short, valid instrument to measure work-family conflict (WFC) with the understanding that these conflicts lead to job dissatisfaction, burnout, job turnover and also possibly affect work productivity.[44]

As with WFC, role overload creates stress, which in turn can cause exhaustion, the first step toward burnout.[45] Bucharach, Bamberger and Conley[46] defined role overload as

> *Still, the biggest issue facing sports editors was the conflict between work and family. In an almost therapeutic fashion, several of the sports editors expressed guilt and remorse for how often they placed the job before their families.*

> *. . . the professional's perception that he or she is unable to complete assigned tasks effectively due to time limitations (i.e., the conflict between time and organizational demands concerning the quantity of work to be done).*[47]

Research Question and Hypotheses

Building upon previous work involving burnout, job satisfaction, organizational support, work-family conflict and overload, the following research question and hypotheses examined:

RQ1:
How do sports editors rate on the three components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey?

H1:

Less experienced sports editors will report higher rates of burnout than will more experienced sports editors.

H2:

The higher level of overall job satisfaction sports editors report the less likely they will report symptoms of burnout.

H3:

The higher level of perceived organizational support sports editors report the less likely they will report symptoms of burnout.

H4:

The higher the level of work-family conflict and role overload sports editors report the more likely they will report symptoms of burnout.

Method

The Associated Press Sports Editors 2005 Directory was used to extract the e-mail addresses of 618 sports editors, assistant sports editors, executive sports editors, sports managing editors, sports assistant managing editors and deputy sports editors. The sample included the comprehensive list of e-mail addresses of every daily newspaper sports editor in the United States listed in the directory. The APSE is the largest organization of its kind with 690 members, including 417 daily newspapers.[48]

The 70-question survey included four sections: job relationship, job satisfaction, work and family life and background. A pre-test among a sample of eight sports editors and assistant sports editors indicated that it could be completed in 10 to 15 minutes.

The survey was anonymous and voluntary. In July 2005, e-mails were sent to 618 sports editors that included a link to the online survey. The survey included a comprehensive introduction and was distributed through freeonlinesurveys.com.

Of the 618 e-mails, 128 were dead accounts, leaving a sample of 490. Of the 490, 201 responded, providing a response rate of 41 percent. The response rate here is in line with previous studies that used Web surveys.[49] Although 201 responded, only 184 were completed surveys.

In an effort to add perspective to the results, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 sports editors who participated in the survey. Survey respondents contacted the researcher and volunteered to be interviewed. The volunteers were given the assurance of anonymity.

Results and Discussion

The average age of the 184 respondents was 43.3 years with an average salary of $64,155. They had an average of 8.8 years experience as a sports editor and the average circulation size of their newspapers was 193,621. They managed 15 employees and averaged 51.7 hours of work per week. Seventy-six percent said they were married, and 78 percent said they had children. Because the respondents work at newspapers significantly larger than the average size newspaper in the U.S., the results of this study gage burnout and life issues for those sports editors at mid- and large-size newspapers more so than those working at smaller newspapers (less than 20,000 circulation).

Depth interviews conducted in March 2006 provided further perspective to the survey data. Consistent with the survey information, on average the interview participants had 10 years of experience as a sports editor, had an average staff size of 17 full-time employees and worked on average of 54 hours a week. Eight of the 10 were married and had children, and the circulation size of the newspapers they worked for ranged between 18,000 and 375,000.

Before addressing the research question and hypotheses, the data were tested for normality, outliers and homogeneity of variance. Independence of observation is assumed with this sample size. Skewness and kurtosis were examined to determine normality. Skewness should fall between +/- 1 and kurtosis is expected to be within +/- 3.[50] The variables exhaustion and cynicism fell within those limitations but professional efficacy did not. A histogram revealed that two outliers were causing the irregular with professional efficacy. They were removed, allowing professional efficacy to fall within the acceptable parameters and reducing the sample size to 182. To determine homoscedasticity, detrended PP were utilized and showed that a similar number of points fell on either side of the line, which indicates homogeneity of variance.

Descriptive statistics were used to answer RQ1 [See Table 1], which asked how sports editors rate on the three components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey. According to the MBI-GS,[51] a mean score of 3.2 or higher would indicate high levels of exhaustion, a mean score of 2.2 or higher would indicate high levels of cynicism and a mean score of 4.0 or less would indicate a low level of professional efficacy and higher rates of burnout. Overall in answering RQ1, sports editors (n = 182) demonstrate a moderate rate of exhaustion (2.45) and

Table 1
Classification of MBI-GS Scores Among Sports Editors

		Ex	Cyn	PE
Sports Editors	Mean	2.45	1.82	5.33
(n = 182)	SD	1.27	1.34	0.58

Ex = Exhaustion; Cyn = Cynicism; PE = Professional Efficacy
Ex: 3.2 and above = high; 2.01-3.19= average; 2.00 and less = low.
Cyn: 2.20 and above = high; 1.01-2.19 = average; 1 and less = low.
PE: 5 and above = high rates of PE, low levels of burnout;
4.01-4.99 = average; 4 and less = low.

cynicism (1.82), but have a high level of professional efficacy (5.33).

H1 states that less experienced sports editors will report higher rates of burnout than will more experienced sports editors. To examine H1, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

Sports editors with six or fewer years (n = 93) of experience as a sports editor were included in the less experienced group, and those with seven or more years comprised the more experienced group (n = 89). The ANOVA determined there were no significant differences between the less experienced and more experienced sports editors in any of the three MBI-GS subcategories. The F-value did not exceed .82 on any of the subscales and the significance was not at an acceptable level (p > .36) on any of the subscales. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

To example H2, H3 and H4, three multiple regression analysis were used with exhaustion, cynicism and professional efficacy acting as the dependent variables, and overall job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, work-family conflict and role overload acting as the independent variables.

H2 states that sports editors who report higher overall job satisfaction are less likely to report symptoms of burnout. In this model, overall job satisfaction [B = -253, t(177) = -3.25, p < .001] is a negative and significant predictor of exhaustion, accounting for about 32 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .316), F(4, 177) = 21.931, p < .001. Overall job satisfaction [B = -.525, t(177) = -7.50, p < .001] is also a negative and significant predictor of cynicism, accounting for about 45 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .449), F(4, 177) = 37.838, p < .001. Additionally, overall job satisfaction [B = .336, t(177) = 4.01, p < .001] was a positive and significant predictor of professional efficacy, accounting for about 20 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .204), F(4, 177) = 12.610, p < .001. The negative relationship with exhaustion and cynicism and positive relationship of professional efficacy on overall job satisfaction indicate that sports editors are reporting higher rates of OJS and lower rates of burnout, thus supporting H2.

H3 states that the higher level of perceived organizational support sports editors report the less likely they will report symptoms of burnout. In the regression model, perceived organizational support [B = -.070, t(177) = -.909, p > .001] was not a significant predictor of the MBI-GS exhaustion. Perceived organizational support [B = -.149, t(177) = -2.165, p < .05] was a negative and significant predictor of cynicism, and perceived organizational support [B = .170, t(177) = 2.06, p < .05] was a positive and significant predictor of professional efficacy. The negative relationship with cynicism and positive relationship of professional efficacy on perceived organizational support indicate that sports editors are reporting higher rates of POS and lower rates of burnout. However, there was no significant relationship between perceived organizational support on exhaustion, so H3 was partially supported.

Interviews with sports editors provided some insight into the relationship between organizational support and burnout. While the survey results indicted

that perceived organizational support was a major factor in job satisfaction, during interviews some sports editors said work colleagues and managers did not understand the job of the sports editor and provided little emotional support. For some sports editors, organizational support was not actual support at all but the freedom to manage the sports department without the interference of upper management. One sports editor said:

> *I know a lot of papers where the management is sticking its nose into everything they're trying to. They don't do that here. They pretty much leave us alone to do what needs to get done but it would be nice to have more resources and to know they understand why we need them.*[52]

Another sports editor said:

> *Sometimes you work in a vacuum and you just try to do your thing and don't really seek support from there. . . I'd rather have no support rather than fight to get this or get this.*[53]

H4 states that sports editors reporting high levels of work-family conflict and role overload are more likely to report symptoms of burnout. Using multiple regression analysis, when exhaustion was the dependent variable, work-family conflict and role overload together accounted for about 25 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .251), $F(2, 179) = 29.924$, $p < .001$. WFC [$B = .296$, $t(179) = 4.11$, $p < .001$] and was a positive and significant predictor of exhaustion, as was role overload[$B = .294$, $t(179) = 4.07$, $p < .001$]. When examining cynicism, together WFC and role overload accounted for about 11 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .109), $F(2, 179) = 11.01$, $p < .001$, but only WFC [$B = .251$, $t(179) = 3.19$, $p < .01$] was a significant predictor of cynicism. Role overload was not. Also, for professional efficacy, WFC and role overload accounted for about 3 percent of the variance (adjusted r-square = .032), $F(2, 179) = 3.01$, $p > .05$. Neither WFC or role overload were significant predictors of professional efficacy. To summarize, work-family conflict and role overload were significant predictors of exhaustion, partially significant predictors of cynicism and had no significant relationship with professional efficacy. The results indicate that H4 was partially supported.

During interviews, sports editors were asked if they thought family, friends, fellow employees and readers appreciated the work they did. Generally speaking, the sports editors said their work was appreciated by their families, which assisted in counterbalancing some of the wear and tear of the job.[54] One sports editor said:

> *I think I'll always feel guilty no matter how my wife feels or how she says she feels about what I'm doing. That's why I did my best before she said 'I do' to warn her. If I didn't have her support 100 percent I would probably look for*

another job in another field because my life with her is more important than anything. There's always guilt.[55]

Still, the biggest issue facing sports editors was the conflict between work and family. In an almost therapeutic fashion, several of the sports editors expressed guilt and remorse for how often they placed the job before their families. One sports editor said:

I think with the family there's an understanding there that we work hard to do a good job but often you're put into the position of what's more important. On the face of things we try to lie and say that family is the most important part of our life but instead it turns out that the job wins out more than half the time.[56]

Conclusions

This study explored the rate of burnout among newspaper sports editors and the issues that might contribute to or diminish burnout, such as job satisfaction, organizational support, work-family conflict and work overload. Although burnout has been examined in hundreds of studies and dozens of professions, minimal burnout research has been conducted on newspaper employees.

Similar to previous results,[57] sports editors in this study suffer moderate rates of burnout on two of the three subcategories of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey. Sports editors suffer from moderate rates of exhaustion and cynicism while demonstrating high rates of professional efficacy. The combination of the items would indicate that, generally speaking, sports editors do not suffer from high rates of burnout. However, some researchers have argued that exhaustion and cynicism are the essential components of burnout, and therefore have only studied those aspects.[58] Even if professional efficacy—generally viewed as the buffer to exhaustion and cynicism—is disregarded in this study, sports editors still only displayed moderate rates of burnout on the other two subcategories.

Contrary to previous studies,[59] less experienced sports editors in this study did not suffer higher rates of burnout than more experienced editors. Nonetheless, sports editors with high levels of job satisfaction and perceived organizational support had lower levels of burnout, which mirrors the findings in previous studies.[60] Also, although work-family conflict and role overload had positive and significant correlations to some burnout variables, their combined effect on burnout was only partially supported.

Similar to the work of Weaver et al.,[61] organizational support in this study appears to play a primary role in tempering ill feelings at work. While Weaver et al. determined that a newspaper's willingness to boost morale and produce quality journalism was a significant predictor of job satisfaction, this study

draws the relationship between organizational support and burnout. Sports editors with higher rates of support suffer lower rates of burnout, resulting in a higher rate of satisfaction, which would support the findings of Weaver et al. However, it should be noted that organizational support in this study did not directly address morale or quality of journalism issues. Nonetheless, during interviews several sports editors said organizational support was not actual support at all, but the opportunity to be left alone without interference from upper management. Autonomy was among the predictors of job satisfaction in Weaver and Wilhoit's work.[62]

Arguably the most revealing aspect of this study is the implications the struggle between work life and family life is having on sports editors. Although burnout from the work might not drive sports editors from the job, the tussle between family obligations and work demands possibly could. Exhaustion and cynicism were prevalent burnout issues when measured with work-family conflict. If that conflict continues, burnout will rise and professional efficacy will fall, creating a true burnout scenario. As a result of burnout, job performance declines, home life suffers and it oftentimes creates job turnover. Unless job stress is properly managed, even the best sports editors are destined to suffer. As one sports editor said:

> *You hate to bring it home all the time but that's a big part of what we do. It can eat you up at times. At several different times you feel like you just can't go on.*[63]

Nonetheless, despite the excessive hours, the public criticism and the infringement on their personal lives, sports editors love their work. In fact, they enjoy it so much that they sacrifice a great deal of their personal lives in order to do it. So while there could be more burnout occurring among sports editors than this study reveals, the satisfaction in doing the job overshadows it. But over time, how long can satisfaction bear the weight of exhaustion, cynicism, lack of support or work overload? Perhaps that is an issue for future research.

This study has limitations, including the sample size. Although the Associated Press Sports Editors is the largest organization of its kind in the United States, there clearly were sports editors who were not included in the sample size, particularly those at smaller newspapers. Smaller newspapers (fewer than 20,000 circulation) are reluctant to join the APSE because of the cost of annual fees. In fact, during the past few years, membership has declined as newspapers face financial cutbacks.[64] Additionally, only 417 of 1,452 U.S. daily newspapers were included in the sample, which certainly minimizes any generalizations that can be drawn from this study.

The bigger issue with the sample is the disparity of the respondents. The average salary of the sports editors ($64,000) and the average circulation size (193,000) are somewhat skewed when 21 sports editors in the study earn $100,000 or more and 16 worked at newspaper with a circulation size of 500,000 or more,

including four sports editors working at newspapers with a circulation of more than 1 million. Generally speaking, these individuals are in the minority among sports editors in this country and not necessarily representative of the sports editor population.

Despite the limitations, burnout and the causes of burnout will continue to be an important aspect of newsroom research. Losing employees to burnout has a social and financial implication on newspapers, one that cannot be ignored in the industry. Financially, turnover costs money in terms of recruitment, hiring and training of a new employee.

As with any organization, a newspaper's most valuable resource is its people. Caring for that resource can be the difference between causing burnout and salvaging good employees, employees who are incredibly dedicated to the organization and the profession.

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