

Managing Burnout And Moving Toward Employee Engagement: Reinvigorating The Study Of  
Stress At Work

Note: This is an *early draft* – please see book for final

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*My alarm blared, but I yearned to stay tucked under the covers. The idea of going to work seemed overwhelming. I was tired of dealing with everyone else's whines and needs. It was just too much—too much work, too many conflicting responsibilities, too high of expectations. All of it was dragging on me, pushing me into a puddle of cynicism. Whereas I used to greet my work with energy, aspiration and passion, the job had slowly but surely eaten away at my confidence, enthusiasm and sense of control. What used to feel meaningful now felt like a chore. I coped by going on automatic pilot, and turned my co-workers and clients into faceless, nameless others—trying to disable them from sapping the little energy I had left. I felt depleted, bored, disengaged and exhausted. I was burned out.*

Those who can identify with this anecdote viscerally understand the feelings that accompany organizational burnout. However, like all aspects of identity, burnout and stress are not just internal feelings. They are constructed, caused, shaped and lived through communication. Communication scholars provide unique insights on these destructive dimensions of organizational life by elucidating the ways various organizational communication practices contribute to, buffer and counteract burnout. Furthermore, communication is central for providing an environment wherein employees are engaged, passionate, and confident—the opposite of those who are burned out.

My hope is that this critical literature review of stress and burnout can assist employees dealing with burnout, managers trying to prevent burnout, and academics who want to study burnout. Comprehensive literature reviews on stress and burnout can be found elsewhere (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). However, these reviews are dated, and gloss the contributions to stress and

burnout theory developed by communication scholars. My goal here is to overview stress and burnout as a particular aspect of destructive organizational communication and, in doing so, reinvigorate the study of stress and burnout in the communication field. The essay overviews the primary processes of stress and burnout, the historical roots that contextualize current research trends, the primary causes and consequences of burnout, ways that burnout may be best addressed, and fruitful areas for future inquiry. Along the way, it discusses how we might alleviate alienation and exhaustion and construct organizational contexts that encourage resilience, purpose, and drive amongst employees.

### Introduction

The language of stress and burnout are ubiquitous. More than 2500 books, journal articles and dissertations examined burnout between 1974 to 1990 alone (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Some called stress the “Black Plague of the eighties” (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994, p. 456). And while the study of these issues has flagged in recent years, a perusal of self-help books and magazines indicates that the popular imagination is still very concerned about stress and burnout. But what does this mean? Where did these terms even come from?

#### *The Emergence of Stress and Burnout*

Much of the stress research was developed during World War II in order to test and select soldiers who would be the most “stress fit” (Newton, 1995). Early stress researchers focused on instincts, the fight-or-flight response, and individuals’ physiological reactions to certain stressors. Today’s primary organizational stressors—which include the pressure of meeting others’ demands, intense competition, the drive to make more money, and feelings of being deprived of things that are rightly deserved (Farber, 2000)—are quite different and more varied

than those faced by soldiers. However, the early research set the stage for later work, focusing on the fitness and coping abilities of individual employees.

The term “stress” was coined by Hans Selye (1976) and was developed from studies in the health field. Selye advanced the theory that stress has three stages: (1) alarm reaction, (2) resistance and (3) exhaustion. Perhaps the most widely received definition of stress views stress as the difference between worker satisfaction--as represented by individual need fulfillment--and the realities of the work situation as experienced by the individual (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

The term “stress” has often been used interchangeably with “burnout” probably because the terms share similar histories and definitions. “Burnout” was coined by Freudenberger (1974) after he noted the stress responses exhibited by employees in halfway houses and free clinics. Burnout is typically conceived of as a general “wearing out” from the pressures of work, which is almost the same as stress’s “exhaustion.” If there is any distinction between the two terms, it is that stress is occasionally used as an umbrella phenomenon, with burnout being conceived as a reaction to stressors that cannot be managed (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Ray, 1983). Burnout manifests in feelings of alienation, cynicism, ineffectiveness and emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001).

Burnout research emerged as a grass-roots approach derived from individuals’ experiences—rather than being a “top-down” scholarly theory (Maslach et al., 2001). The early research was characterized by a strong applied orientation and the focused qualitative study of interpersonal relationships. In the 1980s, the research became much more empirical with a focus on testing and assessing burnout (most using the Maslach Burnout Inventory or MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). The MBI (see Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996 for its latest

version) conceptualizes burnout as a three-dimensional concept characterized (1) emotional exhaustion (2) depersonalization or a negative shift in responses to others, particularly clients, and (3) a decreased sense of personal accomplishment. In the 1990s, burnout research extended to other (non-human service) occupations, and structural equation modeling was used to single out various contributors to burnout. However, we still do not have a measure to know at what point stress and burnout become debilitating. Research is moving toward such with an eight-phase model of burnout (Golembiewski, Boudreau, Sun, & Luo, 1998), but more development is needed before we are able to compare and contrast levels of burnout across various populations.

#### *Pictures and Places of Stress and Burnout*

What does burnout look like and where can it be found? Emotional exhaustion is the most widely reported and thoroughly analyzed component of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Exhaustion prompts dedicated employees to distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their job and clients. When employees detach, they have a tendency to become cynical, depersonalized, and callous. They begin treating humans as objects, use more jargon, and infuse (formerly personalized) service with bureaucratization (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). They become alienated from clients, as well as from one's own emotions and identity (Hochschild, 1983).

To the employee, depersonalization feels like a defense mechanism. Indeed, communication research suggests that work demands can seem more manageable and that employees can feel more comfortable when they perceive their clients in a depersonalized manner. From this standpoint, depersonalization should not be equated with stress (Hullett, McMillan, & Rogan, 2000), but rather seen as a result or sequential component of it. Furthermore, it is important to look beyond individual defense mechanisms for causing depersonalization. Professional socialization is at least partly responsible for employees'

tendency to become callous and aloof; depersonalizing is often treated as an acceptable and professional response to clients (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

Although much research has found a sequential progression from emotional exhaustion to depersonalization, the subsequent link to personal accomplishment or inefficacy is less developed (Maslach et al., 2001). However, being exhausted and depersonalized is likely to interfere with material effectiveness as well as one's subjective feeling of accomplishment.

It is significant that the term burnout was coined through research in social service and health organizations. Some have suggested that "burnout" should only be applied to caregivers, and that we should use other terms to refer to the wearing out of all other workers. Pines, Aronson, and Kafry (1981) suggest the concept of "tedium" to assess workers' experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. Tedium (emotional and physical depletion) results from prolonged chronic pressure while burnout is considered a more specific emotional pressure. Still another measure simplifies the MBI to two factors rather than three. The job demands-resources (JD-R) model of burnout suggests that job demands and (lack of) job resources result in exhaustion and disengagement, respectively (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

In order to better generalize the concept of burnout for non-service related professions, Maslach and her colleagues revised their original burnout inventory and created three versions of the measure (Maslach et al., 1996). One is designed for those working in human services and health care and another is targeted toward educators. In both these versions, the three components studied include the original components of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. A third version is designed for employees who do not

work as closely with people, and is slightly different, measuring exhaustion, cynicism (or a distant attitude) and reduced professional efficacy.

Despite the expansion of the burnout concept, a scan of the literature shows that most burnout studies are focused on employees who work closely with clients, such as nurses, healthcare providers, teachers and other helping professionals (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). The emotional exhaustion of employees is connected to their *frequency* and *intensity* of interpersonal contact with others. Social workers, teachers and nurses have frequent, intense contact with clients, and they report high levels of burnout. Moderate levels of burnout are found in professions with high frequency of interpersonal contact, but low intensity (such as receptionists and salespeople), or high intensity but low frequency interpersonal contact (such as paramedics, public defenders or police detectives). Meanwhile, professionals who experience low frequency and low intensity interpersonal contact with others experience less emotional exhaustion as is the case with laboratory technicians or oil rig workers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Boundary-spanning positions (e.g., public relations practitioners) and supervisors also have higher burnout because they must represent and juggle multiple interests (Tracy, 2000).

#### *Costs and Scope of Problem*

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics identifies stress as costing U.S. employers an estimated \$10,000 per worker per year (reviewed by Neuman, 2004). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates that 40 percent of the U.S. workforce is affected by stress, making it the number one cause of worker disability (Wojcik, 2001). Research consistently finds stress and burnout to cause absenteeism, lowered job performance, reduced commitment, increased health insurance claims and lost productivity, costing up to 150 billion a

year; moreover, nearly 80 percent of employees report that work is the primary source of their stress (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998).

Insurance premiums have skyrocketed as employers must replace staff who have suffered heart-attacks, coronary heart disease, depression, mental breakdowns and other health disorders associated with stress and burnout (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). Compounded with the financial effects, stress and burnout are associated with increases in organizational conflict and aggression (Neuman, 2004). Burnout tends to be contagious, spreading throughout the organization and spilling over into people's home life. In short, stress and burnout are costly in terms of morale, productivity, mental and physical health and personal well-being.

### Key Processes of Stress and Burnout

A scan of the stress and burnout literature shows it to be replete with box-and-arrow models that identify discrete causes, intermediaries and consequences. By virtue of the existing literature, the following review is organized around similar dimensions: (a) stressors, or organizational factors that cause psychological discomfort; (b) individual factors that make some employees more prone to burnout; (c) resources and buffering processes that moderate, disrupt, or counteract burnout and stress; (d) and consequences. Most research has attempted to pinpoint specific variables of burnout, and existing models suggest that stress and burnout proceed in a linear, causative fashion—although some studies have also shown reversed causation (Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996). As I will return to in the conclusion, the topic area is ripe for thick descriptions that detail how various individual and contextual factors are communicatively constructed, and theories that explain how the variables interact as a dynamic fluid process.

#### *Stressors or Organizational Factors*

A good place to begin looking for the causes of stress and burnout is the organization itself. Primary organizational factors of burnout include role stress, work overload, surveillance and other contextual factors such as prestige, work-life stress, lack of power and change.

*Role stress.* Role conflict and role ambiguity, often combined under the umbrella term of role stress, have consistently and strongly been shown to be precursors to burnout. Role conflict occurs when employees face conflicting demands or incongruent messages, and by complying with one they cannot effectively comply with others (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Role ambiguity occurs when employees lack adequate guidance and are bewildered as to how to effectively perform in the job.

The early role stress research focused on contradictory demands within a single workplace; however, research also suggests that role stress becomes salient when employees face contradictory or paradoxical roles in society. For instance, Gaines and Jermier (1983) found that the contradictory mandate of police officers—to enforce rules they did not create and from which they may not benefit—leads to tension, strain and emotional exhaustion. When “enforcement” is a primary part of a job (e.g., IRS agents, correctional officers, police officers, meter maids), “success” on the job can feel elusive, if not paradoxical (Tracy, 2005). Added to this, many of these employees face the double-whammy of doing “dirty work” which is accorded low prestige and public misunderstanding (Tracy & Scott, 2006).

One’s position in the organizational network can lead to role stress. Research suggests that employees or managers who must juggle a variety of priorities or clients, and hold “boundary-spanning” or “linking” roles within the organization, can be more susceptible to burnout. Ray (1991) hypothesized the “combination of doing their job plus the information and relationship processing demands on linkers may make them more vulnerable to burnout” (p. 97).

Albrecht, Irey, and Mundy (1982) similarly discovered that linkers report more burnout than other group members due to their location at the “crossroads of information” and their need to process more information from more sources. Furthermore, such employees must manage multiple identifications, which can be stressful and alienating (Tracy, 2000).

*Workload.* Another factor that figures into the concept of burnout is workload, or the amount of work that must be accomplished. Both quantitative overload (“too much” work) and qualitative overload (work that is “too difficult”) have been linked to a variety of physiological, psychological and behavioral strain symptoms among workers (Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990). Employees who feel they do not have the skills or experience to do the work will burn out, and this is exacerbated if workers perceive severe consequences for not handling the demand. At the same time, we should not assume that a certain amount of work automatically leads to burnout. Perceived workload is highly subjective and depends on an employee’s capacity and access to various resources. Material resources as well as social support, information, feedback help to moderate the stressor of workload (Demerouti et al., 2001).

*Surveillance.* Organizational surveillance and monitoring imply mistrust, and can create increased burnout and tension. A study of 110 administrative worksites found that monitoring invades worker privacy, increases stress, reduces quality and hinders productivity (Nussbaum & duRivage, 1986). Electronic monitoring adversely affects employee perceptions of their working conditions and is related to increased levels of job boredom, tension, anxiety, depression, anger and fatigue.

*Power and control factors.* When employees feel powerless in the face of organizational politics, they are more likely to experience burnout and stress. Organizational politics, considered to be behavior that is strategically designed to maximize self-interests, is linked to

higher levels of anxiety and tension among employees (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997). Ostracism, isolation, feeling “out of the know,” and lack of decision-making power are also associated with burnout and stress (Tracy, 2005). Given the feelings of powerlessness and confusion associated with organizational change, it is of little surprise that downsizing and mergers, as well as the mere anticipation of change, lead to burnout (Ashford, 1988).

### *Individual Factors*

The ability to manage stress and burnout differs amongst employees depending on a number of factors such as workload capacity, predispositions, coping skills, cognitive differences and ability to differentiate between empathic concern and emotional contagion. Furthermore, research has attempted to link burnout with various demographic markers.

*Workload capacity.* As noted, workload and role stress can lead to burnout, but depending employees’ capacity for stress and for amount and type of work, their burnout will differ. In fact, burnout may actually serve organizations in that the employees who stick around are also the ones who can deal with the workload. A study of teachers and burnout found that teachers are *not* very stressed or burned out, and this may be because teachers have good coping skills and those without these skills have self-selected out of the profession (Ray, 1991).

Likewise, research with employees at a psychiatric hospital found that a heavy workload is not necessarily bad (Miller et al., 1990). Although workload can lead to burnout, it is often also linked to increased perceptions of personal accomplishment. To the extent that workload is not exhausting, it can stimulate increased satisfaction with work. Burnout becomes a concern only when the amount of work is perceived as unmanageable.

*Coping skills and predispositions.* Burnout, therefore, depends on the personal coping skills and predisposition of employees; it is an individually subjective response that results from

an interaction between social conditions and personal characteristics. A Type-A personality—which is characterized by a chronic sense of time urgency, a hard-driving and competitive orientation, a strong distaste for idleness, and chronic impatience—would react quite differently to work stress than a Type-B personality—which is more contemplative, and less concerned with desires to succeed, time deadlines or participation in numerous activities (Smeltzer, 1987). Burnout candidates tend to be idealistic and or self-motivating achievers and also tend to seek unattainable goals (King, 1986). Indeed, when employees hold high or unmet personal expectations for the job and for themselves, they are likely to report higher levels of burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

Employees who have little tolerance for bureaucracy, change or powerlessness also tend to experience more burnout. Connor and Douglas (2005) argue that employees' orientation or predisposition toward bureaucracy and structure affect their level of stress. People who have little openness to change or have an external locus of control (attribute events to chance or external others) rather than internal locus of control (attributions to ones own ability) are also more prone to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Consequently, it is not sufficient to simply relate burnout to organizational stressors. Individual personality and behavioral style must also be taken into consideration.

*Cognitive dissonance.* Another individual dimension of burnout is how much a person feels his or her self-concept differs from the type of work they are doing. Discrepancies between the actual self-state (the self-concept) and the ideal self-states (representations of an individual's beliefs about others' hopes and expectations) result in dejection-related emotions, such as disappointment, dissatisfaction and sadness. Various theories have suggested that individuals are motivated to match their self-concept to contextual messages (Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1987).

Performing one identity, and believing oneself to inhabit another, is an uncomfortable psychological state and may lead to burnout (Ray, 1983).

*Empathic concern versus emotional contagion.* Among the most substantial contributions to the burnout literature from the communication discipline is the “empathic communication model of burnout” developed by Kathy Miller and her colleagues in the late 1980s and extended and verified in a number of subsequent studies (Miller, Birkholt, Scott, & Stage, 1995). This model conceptualizes empathy as a two-pronged concept, consisting of (a) *emotional contagion*, in which the caregiver experiences emotional responses parallel to the client's emotion and (b) *empathic concern*, which is a concern about the welfare of the other without feeling parallel emotions of the other. In a study of care-givers and administrative supporters at a psychiatric hospital, researchers found that (a) emotional detachment is important in therapeutic relationships, (b) a caregiver's sense of worth in a job is based largely on his or her ability to communicate empathically, and (c) emotional exhaustion has a negative impact on occupational commitment (Miller, Stiff, & Ellis, 1988). Although empathic concern and emotional detachment lead to increased satisfaction, when employees move to the polar extremes of emotional contagion (complete emotional involvement) or complete depersonalization, they are more likely to burn out.

*Demographic variables.* Myriad demographic variables, including gender, age, education, and marital status have been correlated with burnout. Of all the demographic factors, age is the one that is most consistently related to burnout. Younger employees experience more stress than those in their 30s or 40s (Maslach et al., 2001). This is likely because younger employees are more idealistic, hold higher expectations for themselves and their jobs (Cordes &

Dougherty, 1993), and report experiencing higher levels of verbal and physical abuse at work than older workers (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007; Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006).

Sex differences have been inconsistent except that men tend to be more cynical than women. In terms of marital status, the research is mixed. While some studies have found that single and divorced individuals report higher levels of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001), other studies have found that married individuals can be more burned out, especially when they hold jobs that are misunderstood and denigrated (Tracy & Scott, 2006). As is typical in much of the burnout research, we have very little qualitative explanation as to *why* the studies on the effect of marriage on burnout are inconsistent. The interaction picture is largely missing.

#### *Consequences of Burnout and Stress*

As noted, burnout can be “productive” inasmuch that it acts as a mechanism causing people to self-select out of some professions and into others (Ray, 1983). Despite this burnout “benefit,” the bulk of the literature suggests that burnout has high costs for both individual employees and the organization in terms of employee health, productivity, morale, and quality of interpersonal relationships (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001).

As long as 300 years ago, the relationship between type of job and type of disease was proposed by Bernardo Ramazzini in Italy, and doctors were encouraged to ask patients about their job so that health problems might be better understood (Rosen & Parr, 1959). Burnout is linked to health problems such as increased blood pressure, ulcers, depression, coronary heart disease, increased drinking, fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and gastrointestinal disturbances (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout also results in psychological discomforts such as tension, displeasure, frustration, confusion and anxiety (Miller, Zook, & Ellis, 1989; Starnaman & Miller, 1992). Employees report a range of mental health issues,

including helplessness, depression, and irritability (Cordes & Dougherty, ; Maslach et al.). In addition, when care-givers see themselves treating patients in a “depersonalized” manner, they feel less personal accomplishment and more emotional exhaustion (Miller et al., 1990).

Burnout also harms the organization. Stress-related outcomes cost organizations billions each year (Neuman, 2004). These costs come in the form of low employee performance and high turnover (Albrecht et al., 1982; Miller et al., 1990; Starnaman & Miller, 1992). In addition, organizational stress may seriously impair employees’ abilities to process information and may constrict their decision-making capabilities, thus reducing employee communicative effectiveness during critical times (Pincus & Acharya, 1988). One of the most important outcomes of burnout is a decrease in commitment, which is thought to lead to increases in absenteeism and turnover (Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1983). As Maslach (1982) pointedly noted, “a psychiatric nurse becomes a carpenter or a counselor turns to farming. They swear they will never return to their original occupation with its crush of people and emotional demands” (p. 81). There is compelling evidence that the final step burnout process is the desertion of the stressful occupation (Miller et al., 1988).

Furthermore, the effects of burnout spill over into private sectors. Employees who experience stress and burnout report lower quality relationships with friends, family and co-workers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001). Burned out correctional officers, for instance, have trouble “taking off the uniform” and the domineering attitude that accompanies it. One officer’s wife said that her husband acted like a jerk for an hour or so after he came home from work (Tracy, 2005). Burnout also harms employees’ private lives and relationships because it is linked to increased alcohol use and higher levels of depression (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

Interventions, Resources and Remedies

In light of the overwhelmingly negative personal, organizational and familial effects of burnout, research points to a number of protective factors—interventions, resources and remedies—that can buffer, ameliorate or counteract stress at work. Protective factors have received less attention than the causes and consequences of burnout. Nevertheless, attending to these factors are vital inasmuch as they counteract and problematize the linear cause-effect results of stress (Demerouti et al., 2001).

In order to contextualize the work that has been done on stress/burnout interventions, it is important to remember that most organizational research and training have treated these issues as *individual* pathologies rather than organizational, structural dilemmas (Newton, 1995). Employees are trained to identify and tackle their stressors using tactics such as biofeedback, meditation, and relaxation techniques. And when workers are considered to be too stressed out to do their work effectively, they are often referred to stigmatized employee assistance programs (EAPs). These individualistic stress interventions may assist with personal coping, but they oftentimes miss the *working patterns* that contribute to and define stress (Tracy, 2007). Furthermore, while they may assist employees with the exhaustion dimension of burnout, individual techniques have little affect on changing employees' feelings of cynicism or efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001) or the organizational dynamics contributing to stress/burnout.

Although the overall focus of interventions has been at the individual level, communication scholars have been leaders in focusing on some of the interactional and structural processes that can counteract and buffer burnout. These include social support from group members, positive supervisor-subordinate relationships, participation in decision-making, network integration, toxin management and other structural approaches.

*Social support.* Supportive interactions, or those in which “coworkers are able to vent feelings, clarify perceptions and mutually define the work environment,” (Ray, 1983, p. 188) are vital for reducing organizational ambiguity (a precursor to burnout). Close interaction with coworkers can assist individuals in making sense of their work, especially when employees have a lot of client contact (Miller et al., 1989). Moreover:

Supportive communication helps people when the process functions to decrease the anxiety and stress caused by the experience of the unknown....The significance of supportive communication that reduces one’s perceptions of uncertainty is that it helps the receiver in developing a sense of perceived control over stressful circumstances. (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987, p. 24)

In addition to reducing organizational uncertainty, feedback from group members can help workers monitor perceptions of themselves and their job and reconcile cognitive discrepancies (Ray, 1983). In terms of controlling burnout, it is important for the work group to support colleagues’ personal goals, protect colleagues from the boss, help each other, not be disorganized or pressuring, and be close-knit (Smeltzer, 1987).

Social support can come in several different forms (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987), and each form counteracts stress and burnout in its own way (Ellis & Miller, 1994). *Instrumental support* (an exchange of time, resources or labor) helps prevent emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and as such, may enhance the care and treatment of clients. *Informational support* (related to role definition, general information about job, skills training) is related to increased retention. *Emotional support* (empathy, caring, acceptance and assurance) is directly related to retention, commitment and all dimensions of burnout.

Research also outlines how various *sources* of social support differ—for example, support from the organization, the workgroup, a single co-worker confidante, supervisors or friends and family. The research suggests that no single source of social support is categorically “best.” Some studies demonstrate that strong cohesion with the work group is more important than a strong sense of identity with the entire organization for preventing burnout (Smeltzer, 1987). However, the organization’s role toward support is also significant, and affects the efficacy of social support. For example, caregivers feel more accomplished when employees believe their organization values supportive communication with patients (Hullett et al., 2000). Other studies have identified support from individuals, rather than that from work groups or the larger organization, to be most important in terms of alleviating burnout. In a study of educational organizations, Ray (1991) argued that support groups may actually be a stressor and speculated that a single confidante may be most effective for controlling burnout.

Positive superior-subordinate relationships also alleviate burnout. Some research suggests that it is this relationship, more so than relationships with peers, that is the most influential factor for increasing occupational commitment (Starnaman & Miller, 1992) and reducing burnout (Miller et al., 1989). Supportive supervisors are neither too directive nor too delegative, and facilitate employees’ sense of influence and control.

Similar to the research on *form* of social support (instrumental, informational or emotional), different support *sources* distinctively affect the various dimensions of burnout. For example, support from co-workers (vs. family) increased employees’ feelings of personal accomplishment, but was also related to higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Leiter, 1988). Support from friends and family was better for alleviating emotional exhaustion. Overall, it seems that support from various sources can be helpful for counteracting stress and burnout.

However, most of these quantitative self-report studies do little flesh out what this support looks like, or *how* or *why* the different sources are helpful or harmful.

*Participation in decision making.* Another key communicative remedy to burnout is active participation in decision-making. When employees feel they have no voice in formulating the policies that affect their job, they feel powerless and less accomplished (Tracy, 2005). The more participation afforded employees, the more likely they will feel satisfied and confident in understanding their work role and expectations of the job (Miller et al., 1990) Schuler & Jackson, 1986). Participation in decision-making is especially important for administrative employees who must juggle multiple and fragmented responsibilities (Miller et al., 1989).

*Network integration.* Connected to participation and social support is network integration. Employees who are isolated from each other and from supportive supervisors face risks of burnout, while those who are closely integrated into a communication network are often more satisfied (Albrecht et al., 1982; Ray & Miller, 1991). This research suggests that managers and administrators should design organizational structures and practices so that employees can regularly interact with one another —especially those like social workers or correctional officers who consistently work with troubled or mentally disturbed clients. Especially when it is outside the gaze of superiors or clients, network integration with like-minded peers allows employees to co-construct preferred identities and sidestep the contagion that threatens employees who work with stigmatized populations (Tracy, 2005).

*Toxin management.* Emotions like depression, stress and burnout, are contagious. To guard against the rampant spread of negativity, managers are beginning to realize the importance of infusing excitement and gratitude into the workplace, and employing effective “toxin handlers” (Frost, 2004). Toxin handlers are the managers, secretaries or intermediaries who

address, eliminate and assuage the conflicts, stressors, problems, abuse and hurt feelings that are all too common in organizations. Toxin handlers recognize how pain strips others of self-confidence and effectiveness, and therefore, they step in, reframe anxiety-producing situations, and help people get back to work. Tasks of the toxin handler include listening, holding space for healing, buffering pain, extricating others from painful situations, and helping others transform painful situations.

*Other structural interventions.* Recent research has begun examining several other structural issues that can help counteract burnout. Development of non-maligned workplace-wellness programs (in contrast to traditional EAPs that are often denigrated) are associated with improvement in employee physical and mental health, reductions in absenteeism and multi-million dollar savings to organizations in accident and sickness benefits (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). Research also touts the importance of examining the match of employee and organizations (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). This research suggests that employees may be better able to deal with the causes of burnout (e.g., overload) when they are valued, feel rewarded or are doing something that aligns with their ethical goals.

Although a number of issues may help buffer and counteract burnout, interventions are not uniformly positive. Briner and Reynolds (1999) outline the costs, benefits and limitations of organizational-level stress interventions. They warn researchers and practitioners from becoming “cock-eyed optimists” who make grand recommendations based on unproven, overly-simplified solutions. A fruitful area of future research is an empirical evaluation of burnout interventions, preferably through longitudinal studies that employ both qualitative and quantitative components.

#### Research Trends and Future Directions

After reviewing the literature on workplace burnout and stress, it might be easy to assume that its level of interest in the communication field has, well, burned out. Communication scholars turned their attention to the topic with a flurry of studies in the 1980s, and interest thrived through the mid-1990s. But, slowly, the journal articles have trickled. This is unfortunate because the practical need to better understand and deal with stress and burnout continues. Furthermore, as we move toward the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade, many structural changes in work and society make it clear that we still have much to address.

### *Hot Topics for Future Research*

*Engagement.* The focus of much organizational research has been on negative states or problems. However, researchers are beginning to realize that it is at least as important to understand why it is that employees *flourish* in organizations. Leading this charge are researchers at The Center of Positive Organizational Scholarship (<http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/Center-for-POS/>) and The Compassion Lab ([www.compassionlab.com](http://www.compassionlab.com)). Positive organizational scholarship is focused on analyzing the positive energetic connections among employees, the idea being that by specifically analyzing positive issues such as energy, compassion and engagement at work, scholars can create theories and practical suggestions that can move beyond merely *preventing* negative behaviors to helping *construct* positive ones. One of the most promising directions for future burnout research, spurred by positive organizational scholarship, is the focus on workplace *engagement* as the antipathy of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy. Research is beginning to explore employee vigor, activation, pleasure, dedication, willingness to invest effort, the ability to resist fatigue, and total immersion in one's work (Maslach et al.). Similarly, a focus on organizational "health" is emerging as a proactive way of addressing occupational stress and

burnout (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). Communication scholars are especially well prepared to understand how issues of health and emotional states of engagement are constructed and constrained through communication, interaction, organizational policies and larger societal structures.

*Employee-organization match.* Another emerging line of burnout research has emerged in the realization that it is important to examine individual and organizational factors *in tandem*. Although much of the work in the 80s and 90s focused on single variables of burnout and discriminating which variables led to “how” much of a specific burnout dimension, researchers are now beginning to examine the larger context. This includes investigating societal trends, such as changes in the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) and even work-life issues that affect burnout (Lawrence, 2006). Furthermore, I see a hopeful space for future communication research in terms of examining how the employee and environment intersect.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) have proposed six areas of worklife that may be especially susceptible to mismatches between employee expectations/capabilities and the organizational environment. These include workload, control/authority, reward, community (positive connection with others in the workplace), fairness (confirmation of respect and self-worth), and values (ethics). These mismatches do not just summarize research findings but provide a more complex conceptual framework for re-imagining burnout research in terms of relationships and interaction. Unfortunately, this framework has yet to make its way into communication research.

*Culture and ethnicity.* A third area of promising research is that of comparing and contrasting stress and burnout internationally. Burnout has been studied around the globe, with equivalent terms in other languages, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been translated into many languages (Maslach et al., 2001). Studies show a lower level of burnout in European

countries than in North American countries, but this may be because North Americans are more willing to admit cynicism or respond extremely to the MBI self-report measures. In order to better understand the reported differences, it would be useful to conduct more qualitative research to explain and expand the survey data. Furthermore, we know very little about how stress and burnout vary across ethnicity. It would be valuable to examine cultural differences, not only in terms of how different ethnicities and cultures score on traditional burnout measures, but how burnout fundamentally manifests differently across culture and ethnicity.

*Work-life effects.* A fourth area of recent research—the effects of work-life balance on burnout—recognizes that we must move beyond the container metaphor of organizations for understanding stress. Work-life conflict generally afflicts women more so than men, since women usually manage more labor in the home and typically lack influential social support at work (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). Women rarely have the same level of social support in traditional patriarchal workplaces, as they are often barred from certain powerful networks (e.g. “old boys club). Work-life conflict has also been exacerbated by low levels of household assistance. Women work a second shift (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), spending at least twice as much time on housework and childcare as men, even when women work full-time and earn 50 percent or more of a family’s income (Alberts & Trethewey, 2007). On its face, this data would suggest that women face increased risks of being burned out. However, several self-report studies of burnout and household help report a counterintuitive finding—that women’s experience of tedium and job stress are actually *more extreme* when they report receiving *more* household assistance from their partners (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). Future qualitative research could fruitfully unpack the reasons behind this counterintuitive finding, in particular, and work-life balance issues and organizational stress, in general. It may be that women who receive

higher levels of household help feel less “womanly,” or that the help may be “high hassle support” accompanied by negative feelings of having to “nag.”

Similarly, we do not know the reasons behind the mixed findings regarding the effect of having families and experiencing burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Some research suggests that married individuals and people with children report less burnout simply because they are older, and therefore, more mature and less idealistic. Or, it could be that families lend support or a balance to work. However, families can also provide another burden, another arena to manage, and some studies have found that married individuals are more burned out.

#### *Methodological Considerations: Moving from Boxes and Arrows to Narratives*

When we consider how the concept of burnout originally emerged, it is ironic that the research is so dominated by quantitative self-report studies, structural equation modeling and cross-sectional correlational designs. The study of burnout is traced to Freudenberger (1974) who collected direct accounts of employees who experienced emotional exhaustion, and Maslach (1976) who conducted interviews with human service workers. Despite these qualitative beginnings, an extensive review of burnout literature (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) found that only research by Maslach and Pines (1977; Pines & Maslach, 1980) used case studies and only five studies were longitudinal. Another notable qualitative study is by Cherniss (1995) who conducted a set of case-study interviews as a 12-year follow-up. Observational reports are needed but missing (Handy, 1988), and experimental research could assist in testing the burnout models and potential interventions (Briner & Reynolds, 1999). Although organizations have begun to institute burnout trainings, there is little empirical data that clearly indicate their success. Program evaluation is another important area for future exploration.

After reviewing the available research, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that we need theories that explain the *relationships* between individual variables and the effects of various interventions. It is simply not good enough to unproblematically rely on box-and-arrow diagrams that linearly connect individual causes, organizational factors, buffering variables and consequences. We need to know the types of interactions, feelings, and communication that *construct* the boxes, as well as the recursive nature of the relationships among boxes. We need to have thick descriptions of those little arrows. In other words, we need to better understand what happens *in between* the boxes. Communication scholars can very competently attend to this need.

In closing, I would specifically encourage communication researchers to consider a narrative approach to the study of burnout. As we know from narrative theory, stories do not just represent individuals' life experiences, they fundamentally construct plot lines for different identities (Lawler, 2002). Comparing and contrasting narratives from burned out employees and those who are engaged and resilient would be fascinating. What are the different turning points in the stories? Who are the main actors? What metaphors are used?

Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the effects of telling and writing narratives of burnout and stress as a type of intervention technique. People better handle their emotions and illnesses associated with trauma when they are able to disclose them, whether that be verbally or in writing. "Confronting deeply personal issues has been found to promote physical health, subjective well-being, and...adaptive behaviors" (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 162). Past communication research of workplace bullying bolsters the therapeutic nature of writing, talking and drawing negative workplace emotions (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006), but such an approach has not investigated in terms of assisting with stress and burnout.

The current literature provides an excellent overview of the causes, consequences and buffering variables of burnout. However, there is still much work to be done in understanding how and why these factors work together as a process and how interaction and communication can construct burnout, or conversely, engagement. Narratives are integral to providing a window into how employees make sense of and respond to their work, their identities, the world and their relationships (Lawler, 2002). Narratives are not just representations of “real” life, but are fundamentally productive of interpretations and reactions, some which are healthy, engaged and resilient, and some that lead to alienation, cynicism, and burnout. Communication scholars have much to offer in terms of telling this—as of yet—untold story of burnout and stress.

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