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Introduction to “The Changing Role of the Librarian: Effects of Role Related Stress”

Reed Bramble

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In the digital age of online databases and catalogs, the role of the academic librarian has evolved into an occupation expected to meet very different needs than the traditional librarian of twenty years ago. While technological advancement has extended the scope of student and faculty capabilities and significantly sped up the information search, academic librarians have had to adapt quickly to changing university demands. These new job responsibilities have added new dimensions of work-related stress not originally experienced by the traditional profession. Today's librarians not only have to provide the conventional practice of reference and resource management in the library's physical realm, but must also take command of the digital realm by accessing web-based information (Luo, 2009; Orick, 2000). They are increasingly expected to help students access online materials suitable for their respective projects, digitize a variety of library services, and establish licensing agreements to increase the depth and quality of online databases. They are also being called upon to collaborate in both the instructional and clinical settings, providing relevant information to both faculty professors and clinical practitioners (Moore, Miller, Pitchford, & Jeng, 2008; Tod, Bond, Leonard, Gilsenan, & Palfreyman, 2007). While intriguing, the role expansion of the academic librarian brings several new challenges to the forefront, and they will need to develop coping strategies to deal with role-related stress.

The work-related consequences of stress have certainly not gone unnoticed by scientific researchers. The problems resulting from on-the-job stressors have been the subject of a wide array of studies in the field of organizational psychology. The research suggests that there are several potential origins of job-related stress, from environmental stressors such as distracting noises or extreme heat, to interpersonal stressors such as coworker conflict, sexual harassment, or work overload (Griffin & Clarke, 2011). Internal stressors should be of great importance to organizations, as they can increase counter-productive work behavior as well as reduce

organizational commitment and task performance. Stress is also often at the heart of physical and mental well-being, resulting in depression, anxiety, fatigue, and several other health-related problems. While stress affects workers at the individual level, the implications of stress in the workplace can in-turn burden the organization. Executive leaders recognize that they are paying both directly through lowered attendance, productivity, and performance, and indirectly through health-related expenses (Griffin & Clarke, 2011).

For the purposes of the present study, two role-related stressors are being investigated in the academic librarian population as a result of their rapidly evolving role: role ambiguity and role overload (House, Schuler, & Levanoni, 1983; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Role ambiguity is experienced when employees sense a lack of clarity, specificity, or predictability in the workplace regarding responsibilities or the boundaries of their jobs. While this a frequent occurrence in newly-acquired positions, the case of the academic librarian is of particular interest because of the quick adjustment to new technological advancements.

Librarians may not have a firm understanding of their new role, nor may they still be qualified to perform the tasks that have been assigned to them. Role overload occurs when an employee experiences a job as overwhelming due to a lack of time or an overabundance of responsibilities. This puts strain on the employee as they often must work long hours at a fast pace to meet the demands of a position that they may or may not have the skills and resources to meet (House, Schuler, & Levanoni, 1983; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

As these role-related constructs were introduced to the scientific community more than half a century ago, hundreds of studies have investigated the effects of role ambiguity and role overload in a variety of professions, contexts, and cultures (Beehr & Glazer, 2005). Consistent with Kahn's role theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), these studies have

shown that these particular role-related stressors are a significant source of psychological strain, which is comprised of negative feelings associated with mental health such as anxiety, depression, and irritability (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Beehr & Glazer, 2005). Past studies investigating this psychological strain have revealed poor work-related outcomes in their results, such as decreased job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment, as well as negative health outcomes. Recent studies have shown role ambiguity to be positively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and negatively-related to personal accomplishment (Yurur & Sarikaya, 2012). All this being said, there are several different factors that play into whether or not an individual will actually experience the negative consequences associated with these role-related stressors. Numerous studies have studied the mediators and moderators of the relationship between the constructs. For example, recent research has indicated that different types of organizational cultures and individual personalities can either counteract or exacerbate the negative effects of role ambiguity (Bolat, Bolat, & Yuksel, 2011; Ghorpade, Lackritz & Singh, 2011). The most significant of these mediators and moderators is whether or not the individual values the situation as personally significant or beyond their own capabilities. The process is known as cognitive appraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). If the individual has developed coping strategies to deal with the role-related stressors, it could also affect the work-related and health-related outcomes for that specific individual.

Past research in the area of librarianship has shown that academic librarians are not strangers to high stress levels, surpassing those of firefighters, teachers, and police officers (BBC, 2010). Several articles provide coping strategies to handle the most stressful characteristics of the librarian position (Topper, 2007; Yucht, 2006). Some articles describe the adjustment to newer technology-related stressors (Mueller, 2006), while other articles summarize

the ever-increasing demands, expectations, and workload of the profession (Knibbe-Haanstra, 2008). In addition, several authors have offered their personal qualitative accounts of the stress librarians experience on a daily basis. For example, Burke and colleagues (2009) described the field work of serials librarians in detail, often referring to experiences that could be categorized into role overload and role ambiguity. While these descriptive accounts provide revealing insight into what goes on behind-the-scene, they leave much to be desired in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the reported stress.

There have been few empirical studies surrounding role-related stressors and the academic librarian, despite their rapidly evolving responsibilities. One such study examined the levels of burnout in public reference librarians (Smith & Marchant, 1984). Burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and often occurs as a result of prolonged stress (Schaufel, Leiter, Maslach, 2009). The researchers found that role ambiguity and role overload in librarians contributed to high levels of burnout, contrary to public perception. In another study, Roose and colleagues (1984) found that 42% of librarians were at or near burnout and 14% were severely burned out. Lastly, in her study from 1996, Ennis (2005) researched the stress levels experienced by academic librarians as a result of their changing role, increased workload, and four other technological factors. She found that the most stressful aspects of a librarian's job were technology-related expectations, pace of change, and the lack of standardization. While these empirical studies are useful for making sense of the stress librarians experience, most of the studies occurred more than a decade ago before major advancements in technology occurred. Because of this, expectations and demands for librarians have increased exponentially, and there is a desperate need for an assessment that is more representative of the current state of librarians.

In a somewhat more recent investigation of role-related stress, Affleck (1996) measured the burnout in bibliographic instruction librarians using survey and interview methodology. Her results showed that more than half of the librarian participants experienced some form of burnout, and roughly 8.5% experienced all three forms of burnout. The study also suggested that role-related factors were likely causing the burnout to occur in these librarians. Other studies have indicated that individuals in these fields have particularly high levels of burnout (Acker, 2008) and occupational stress (Alexandros-Stamatios, Davidson, & Cooper, 2003), and they are especially vulnerable when it comes to role ambiguity (Singh, 1998). Although there are no other recently published articles examining role stressors in the librarian population, the increased usage of information technology in the library setting has likely results in severe negative outcomes. Research suggests that role-related conflict is often associated with professions that make use of information technology (Dhar & Dhar, 2010). Other studies have suggested that role ambiguity is high amongst information technology professionals as well as occupations that have changed dramatically and quickly due to technological advancements (Baroudi, 1985; Bhagat, Krishnan, Nelson, Leonard, Ford, & Billing, 2010).

The present study was designed with the intent of filling in the gaps in our understanding of the stress experienced by librarians in the 21st century. We hypothesized that 1) relatively high levels of role ambiguity and role overload will be found in the academic library population, and 2) role ambiguity and role overload in academic librarians will predict the consequences associated with the stressors in other populations, such as psychological well-being, life satisfaction, job satisfaction, work withdrawal, perceived stress, health symptoms, social support, and burnout.

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## Appendix

*Participants.* Sixty universities will be randomly sampled from the more than 120 four year universities in the Midwest. All librarians listed on the university libraries' websites (approximately 700 librarians) will be emailed and asked to participate in the study.

*Measures.* Both role overload and role ambiguity will be measured, as well as the consequences of these stressors. The questionnaire will include the measures described below. Please see attachment for all measures to be included in the questionnaire.

Role ambiguity. This will be assessed with scales developed by Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970). The measure of role ambiguity asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they have experienced ambiguous situations including those involving behavior-outcome contingencies, work-related expectations, policies and duties. The scale has been shown to have high validity and reliability and have been used extensively in research related to role-related stress.

Role overload. Assessed with a six item measure developed by Ivancevich and Matteson (1980).

Job demands and job control. The proposed study will include measures of job demands and job control, which have been shown to be related to role overload. Measures of job demands and job control were taken from Butler (2007); the 3 and 5-item measures ask respondents to indicate the extent to which they have control over their job and the extent to which their job makes demands on them, using a 5-point response scale. In Butler's (2007) study, the job control and job demands scales had internal reliability coefficients of .85 and .81, respectively.

Psychological well-being. Participants' psychological well-being will be assessed with the General Health Questionnaire 12 (GHQ-12; Banks, Clegg, Jackson, Kemp, Stafford, & Wall, 1980). The measure asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with twelve symptom-related statements, such as "I have lost sleep over worry" and "I have felt constantly under strain" in the previous six months, on a 7 point scale. The GHQ has been shown to be a valid indicator of psychological well-being in non-clinical samples (Banks, et al., 1980).

Life satisfaction. Participants' overall life satisfaction will be assessed with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), a five item scale asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements related to their level of satisfaction with life in general, on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Job satisfaction. Participants will complete the Abridged Job in General scale (AJIG; Russell et al., 2004), an eight item abridged version of the facet scale from the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969; Roznowski, 1989), a widely used measure of job satisfaction. The measure requires participants to circle "yes", "no", or "?" (don't know) to indicate if they think each of eight adjectives such as "undesirable" and "excellent" characterizes their work. The scale has been shown to have good internal consistency and to correlate with measures of related constructs (Russell et al., 2004).

Work withdrawal. Participants' work withdrawal (behaviors representing a partial or complete psychological and behavioral withdrawal from work) will be assessed with the Work Withdrawal scale developed by Hanisch and Hulin (1991). The measure asks respondents to indicate how often in the past year they have done each of twelve behaviors at work (e.g., "missing meetings"), on an 8-point frequency scale.

Perceived stress. Research on role ambiguity and role overload suggests that both role-related constructs act as stressors, or demands that exceed an individual's resources (e.g., Beehr & Glazer, 2005). Thus, participants in the proposed study will complete a measure of perceived stress, with the expectation that individuals experiencing more role ambiguity and overload will report higher levels of perceived stress. The measure of perceived stress to be used is the 10-item version of Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen et al., 1983; Cohen & Williamson, 1988), which asks participants to indicate how often they have experienced each of ten feelings and thoughts during the previous month. The scale has been shown to be related to the experience of stressors, and to have good internal reliability.

Psychological well-being. Participants' psychological well-being will be assessed with a shortened version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ; Banks, Clegg, Jackson, Kemp, Stafford, & Wall, 1980). The measure asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with nine symptom-related statements, such as "I have lost sleep over worry" and "I have felt constantly under strain" in the previous six months. The GHQ has been shown to be a valid indicator of psychological well-being in non-clinical samples (Banks, et al., 1980).

Health symptoms. Health symptoms will be assessed with the *Health Conditions Index* (HCI; Brodman, Erdman, Lorge, & Wolff, 1949), a measure adapted from the *Cornell Medical Checklist*. The HCI asks respondents to indicate whether they have experienced each of 13

symptoms (e.g., headaches) during the past six months, using a 3-point response scale (“yes,” “?”, “no”).

Life satisfaction. Participants’ overall life satisfaction will be assessed with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), a five item scale that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with five statements related to their level of satisfaction with their life in general, on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Social Support. Social support will be measured with three sub-scales developed by Caplan, Cobb, & French (1975). The measure asks respondents to indicate the extent to which each of three sets of people ("your immediate supervisor," "other people at work," and "your spouse, friends, and relatives") provide six different aspects of social support (e.g., being willing to listen to personal problems), on a 4-point scale. (**Note – we decided not to include this in the questionnaire**)

Burnout. The extent to which the participants are experiencing burnout will be assessed with a self-report measure of the exhaustion and engagement facets of work-related burnout developed by Demerouti, (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003). The measure asks respondents to rate the extent to which they agree with 16 statements such as “after my work, I usually feel worn out and weary,” on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The measure has been shown to be psychometrically sound and to have good construct validity (Demerouti et al., 2003).

#### Measures to be used in the Proposed Study

Job Demands (JD) and Job Control (JC; items from Karasek, 1979, as revised by Butler, 2007)

	Never/ Rarely				Always/ Very Often
To what extent do you have freedom to decide how to organize your work? (JC)	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent do you have control over what happens in your job? (JC)	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent does your job require you to work hard? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent does your job require you to do a great deal of work? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you feel you have enough time to do your job? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5

To what extent is there an excessive amount of work in your job? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent are you faced with conflicting demands on your job? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent do you feel there is not enough time for you to finish your work? (JD)	1	2	3	4	5

Perceived Stress (10-item version, Perceived Stress Scale (PSS))  
Cohen, Kamarach, & Mermelstein (1983)

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, please indicate with a check how often you felt or thought a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

2. In the last month, how often have you felt you were unable to control the important things in life?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often



7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

\_\_\_ 0 = never    \_\_\_ 1 = almost never    \_\_\_ 2 = sometimes    \_\_\_ 3 = fairly often    \_\_\_ 4 = very often

Job Satisfaction – (Abridged Job in General Scale (AJIG; Russell et al., 2004))

What is your JOB IN GENERAL like MOST OF THE TIME? Circle YES if the item describes your JOB IN GENERAL, NO if it does not describe your JOB IN GENERAL, and ? if you cannot decide.

- |                           |         |   |    |
|---------------------------|---------|---|----|
| 1. GOOD .....             | ... Yes | ? |    |
| No                        |         |   |    |
| 2. UNDESIRABLE .....      | Yes     | ? | No |
| 3. BETTER THAN MOST ..... | Yes     | ? | No |
| 4. DISAGREEABLE .....     | Yes     | ? | No |
| 5. MAKES ME CONTENT ..... | Yes     | ? | No |
| 6. EXCELLENT .....        | Yes     | ? | No |
| 7. ENJOYABLE .....        | Yes     | ? | No |
| 8. POOR .....             | Yes     | ? | No |

Role Overload (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980)

Agree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
1. I am responsible for an almost unmanageable 5 number of assignments and/or patrons.	1	2	3	4	
2. I often receive an assignment without adequate 5 resources and materials to get it done.	1	2	3	4	
3. <i>I receive enough help and equipment to get 5 my job done (reverse coded).</i>	1	2	3	4	
4. The amount of work I am required to do 5 seems to be increasing.	1	2	3	4	
5. The demands for the amount of work required 5 in my job are unreasonable.	1	2	3	4	
6. I never seem to have enough time to get everything 5 done on my job.	1	2	3	4	

## Work Withdrawal (Hanisch &amp; Hulin, 1991)

Please tell us how many times you have done the following things in the past year.  
Remember that ALL OF YOUR ANSWERS ARE PRIVATE -- no one you work with  
will ever see them.

	More than once week	Never	Maybe once a year	2 or 3 times a year	Every other month	About once a month	More than once a month	Once a week	a
Missing meetings 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Drinking alcohol or using drugs 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
after work mostly because of things that happened at work									
Messing with equipment so that 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
you cannot get work done									
Being absent from work 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Letting others do your work 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
for you									
Taking frequent or long coffee 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
or lunch breaks									
Making excuses to go somewhere 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
to get out of work									
Being late for work 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Doing poor work 7		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	

Using equipment (such as 7 the phone) for personal use without permission	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Looking at your watch or 7 clock a lot	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ignoring those tasks that will 7 not help your performance review or pay raise.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

## Satisfaction with Life (Deiner, 1984)

The following statements describe how satisfied you are with your life. Please circle a number that best indicates the extent to which you agree with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree
In most ways my life is close to 7 how I would like it to be.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Things in my life are excellent. 7	1	2	3	4	5	6
I am satisfied with my life. 7	1	2	3	4	5	6
So far I have gotten the important 7 things I want in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
If I could live my life over, I would 7 change almost <u>nothing</u> .	1	2	3	4	5	6

(Note – somehow there are 2 other items we inserted....on stress)

Psychological Well-being (The General Health Questionnaire 12)  
GHQ-12; Banks et al., 1980; Goldberg, 1972

We want to know how your health has been in general over the last few weeks. Please read the questions below and each of the four possible answers. Circle the response that best applies to you.

In the past 6 months have you....

	Better than usual	The same as usual	Less than usual	Much than
less usual				
1. ...been able to concentrate on what you're doing?	1	2	3	4
	Not at all	No more than usual	Somewhat more than usual	
Much more usual				
2. ....lost much sleep over worry?	1	2	3	4
3. ...felt constantly under strain?	1	2	3	4
4. ...felt you couldn't overcome your difficulties?	1	2	3	4
5. ...been feeling unhappy or depressed?	1	2	3	4
6. ...been losing confidence in yourself?	1	2	3	4
7. ...been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?	1	2	3	4
8. ...been feeling reasonably happy, all things considered?	1	2	3	4
	Much less than usual	Less than usual	The same as usual	
More usual				
9. ...felt that you are playing a useful part in things?	1	2	3	4
10. ...felt capable of making decisions about things?	1	2	3	4

11. ...been able to enjoy your normal day to day activities?	1	2	3	4
12. ...been able to face up to your problems?	1	2	3	4



Burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003).

Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. <i>I always find new and interesting aspects in my work.</i>	1	2	3	4
2. There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work.	1	2	3	4
3. It happens more and more often that I talk about my work in a negative way.	1	2	3	4
4. After work, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better.	1	2	3	4
5. <i>I can tolerate the pressure of my work very well.</i>	1	2	3	4
6. Lately, I tend to think less at work and do my job almost mechanically.	1	2	3	4
7. <i>I find my work to be a positive challenge.</i>	1	2	3	4
8. During my work, I often feel emotionally drained.	1	2	3	4
9. Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work.	1	2	3	4
10. <i>After working, I have enough energy for my leisure activities.</i>	1	2	3	4
11. Sometimes I feel sickened by my work tasks.	1	2	3	4
12. After my work, I usually feel worn out and weary.	1	2	3	4
13. <i>This is the only type of work that I can imagine myself doing.</i>	1	2	3	4
14. <i>Usually, I can manage the amount of my work well.</i>	1	2	3	4
15. <i>I feel more and more engaged in my work.</i>	1	2	3	4
16. <i>When I work, I usually feel energized.</i>	1	2	3	4

*Note.* Disengagement items are 1, 3(R), 6(R), 7, 9(R), 11(R), 13, 15. Exhaustion items are 2(R), 4(R), 5, 8(R), 10, 12(R), 14, 16. (R) means reversed item when the scores should be such that higher scores indicate more burnout.

### Role Ambiguity (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970)

Very False 1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7 Very True

1. *My authority matches the responsibilities assigned to me.*
2. I don't know what is expected of me.
3. *My responsibilities are clearly defined.*
4. *I feel certain about how much authority I have.*
5. *I know what my responsibilities are.*
6. *I have clear planned goals and objectives for my job.*
7. I don't know how I will be evaluated for a raise or promotion.
8. I often have unclear orders from my boss.
9. *Explanations are clear of what has to be done.*
10. I work under unclear policies and guidelines.
11. *My boss makes it clear how he/she will evaluate my performance.*

## Health Conditions (Brodman et al., 1949)

The following questions are about your health. For each of the following health conditions, circle YES if you have had condition within the PAST 2 YEARS and NO if you have not had the condition within the PAST 2 YEARS.

Heart disease or condition	Yes	No
Back problems	Yes	No
Respiratory or lung problems	Yes	No
High blood pressure	Yes	No
Severe headaches	Yes	No
Ulcer	Yes	No
Shortness of breath upon exerting yourself	Yes	No
Frequent headaches	Yes	No
Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep	Yes	No
Nightmares	Yes	No
Frequent stomach pains	Yes	No
Feel exhausted for no good reason	Yes	No
Frequent colds	Yes	No