OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND JOB SATISFACTION IN MEDIA PERSONNEL ASSIGNED TO THE IRAQ WAR (2003)

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This paper investigates occupational stressors amongst media personnel assigned to work on covering the Iraq War via interviews with 54 journalists from the BBC and Reuters, who worked in Iraq between February and April 2003. A range of stressors were identified that could be categorized into three main themes, control over the situation, support from management and grief from the death of colleagues. Journalists not embedded with military units were more likely to report negative physical and emotional health outcomes. The study concludes that hazardous work environments do not, by themselves, cause stress and poor job satisfaction. Rather, organizational factors, the imbalance between the ability to make decisions about how to carry out their job effectively and the perceived rewards of working in such environments appear to have a greater impact on work related stress.

KEYWORDS Iraq War; job satisfaction; journalists; media; occupational stress; qualitative research

Introduction

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the impact of factors within and outside of the workplace that may contribute to work related stress (Marchand et al., 2005). A simple universal definition of stress is elusive, but may be simply described as the psychological, physiological and behavioural response of an individual who perceives there to be an imbalance between the demands placed upon them and their ability to cope with those demands (Michie, 2002). Responses to stress may be emotional, behavioural, cognitive or somatic (Michie, 2002). Workplace stress can occur as a result of negative interactions between the work environment, the nature of the work itself and worker characteristics. The potential for stress to impact adversely on physical health has been linked with a number of factors including when the source of stress exceeds the ability to cope (Lazarus, 1991); irregular schedules and long hours (Bourbonnais et al., 1999; Spurgeon et al., 1997); weak social support (Bultmann et al., 2002a; Stansfeld et al., 1999); role ambiguity (Bultmann et al., 2002b; de Jonge et al., 1999); conflicting requests (de Jonge et al., 2000); and job insecurity (Bourbonnais et al., 1999; McDonough, 2000). Workplace stress may also be linked to individual characteristics such as gender (Stansfeld et al., 1999; de Jonge et al., 2000) and personality traits (Stansfeld et al., 1999; McDonough, 2000). Work–family conflict and family–work conflict have been found to be associated with lower levels of work satisfaction and greater psychological distress (Burke and
OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND JOB SATISFACTION

Greenglass, 1999; Grzywacz, 2000; Kelloway et al., 1999). Jobs requiring frequent travel and uncertainty in travel plans have also been found to be associated with increased stress (Espino et al., 2002). A systematic review of 485 studies linking self-reported job dissatisfaction with measures of physical and mental well being, showed that job dissatisfaction was most strongly associated with mental/psychological problems such as burnout, self esteem, depression and anxiety (Faragher et al., 2005). Those who work in "occupations which predictably include exposure to intense hazards and may be additionally vulnerable in terms of developing negative health outcomes, including alcohol disorders (Lehman and Bennett, 2002; Head et al., 2004); Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Laposa and Alden, 2003; Carlier et al., 1997); burnout (Bruce et al., 2005); and disruptions in cognitive schemas (Galloucis et al., 2000). Two key theoretical models potentially explain the relationship between the workplace and health outcomes.

Theoretical Models of Stress

The “job demand—control” (JD—C) model suggests that workplace stress occurs in environments where there is a convergence between high psychological demands (i.e. insufficient time to complete work, the volume of work, and conflicting demands on workers), low control in terms of decision latitude (i.e. the degree to which individuals can use their skills, experience and knowledge in the manner that they determine themselves), and low social support (de Croon et al., 2002; Wilhelm et al., 2004; de Jonge et al., 2000; Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Mausner-Dorsch and Eaton (2000) added two additional dimensions to the model (hazardous work environment and physical demands) in order to assess whether the conditions in the demand-control model held true, and whether there was an association between dimensions from the demand control model and clinical depression (Mausner-Dorsch and Eaton, 2000). The study suggested that a lack of authority to take decisions had the strongest relationship to depression, and that high psychological job strain was associated with significant increases in depression and an increased likelihood of more severe forms of depression. Hazardous working conditions per se had no association with depression.

The second model, the ‘effort—reward imbalance’ (ERI) model has also gained considerable empirical support (van Vegchel et al., 2005). The model was developed to acknowledge an individual’s need for control within the workplace, and suggests that strain/stress reactions occur when there is an imbalance between high efforts spent and low rewards received (Siegrist, 1996). Working hard without appreciation is therefore a recipe for a stressful work environment and “active distress” in employees. Furthermore the model suggests that highly committed individuals may especially be at increased risk of poor health outcomes.

One study has investigated the application of the JD-C and ERI models in relation to employee wellbeing (de Jonge et al., 2000). Whilst the study found that high effort and low occupational rewards (ERI) were stronger predictors of poor well-being than low job control (JD—C) both models independently influenced employee well-being in a cumulative manner.

Media personnel reporting from conflict zones are likely to be exposed to numerous stressors (Collins, 2001). Only a handful of studies exist about the health and well being of media personnel who work in conflict zones. A study of 18 journalists who had witnessed an execution showed that whilst many had short-term difficulties with dissociation,
anxiety, and depression symptoms, these were not sustained in the longer-term (Freinkel et al., 1994). By contrast a further study including journalists who had reported on traumatic events (such as war, riots, rapes, homicides) found that some experienced distress symptoms including intrusive recollections of the events, avoidance of event reminders and symptoms of depression; some distress for several years (McMahon, 2001). Two further studies of front-line journalists found lifetime rates of PTSD to be similar to combat veterans, and rates of depression similar to, or higher than, the general population (Feinstein et al., 2002; Pyevich et al., 2003). A further study of photographic journalists reported that the greater the number of assignments photographing traumatic events, the greater level of distress reported (Newman and Handschuh, 2003). Thus as research has been conducted so it has become more evident that journalists may be affected by the unusual and often hazardous environments in which they have to work.

During the Iraq War (2003) over 600 media personnel (including journalists, photographers, cameramen and producers) had unprecedented access to military units. During this time thirteen media personnel were killed, with a further 23 killed in 2004 as a result of insurgent action, U.S. friendly fire, Iraqi armed forces, and other acts of war. Many others were injured. Most of those killed or injured were operating as unilateral media personnel, rather than having been embedded with coalition military personnel (embeds). Eighteen media workers, such as translators, security support, and drivers, were also killed during the Iraq conflict in 2003/4. Some have argued that emotional bonds between embeds and the military units they were embedded with, led to increased job satisfaction and trust between the media and the military during the Iraq War (Wong et al., 2003). However, others suggest that increased competition both within and between news organisations to be the first to report a story during the conflict meant that media personnel were increasingly prepared to take risks in what are already dangerous environments. This was particularly true for unilateral personnel, who operated with broad freedom of access, either by freely joining or leaving troops in the field and travelling on any military vehicle with space available; or by “participating in the more freeform ‘cowboy’ or ‘four-wheel-drive’ journalism, in which reporters reject[ed] both the constraint of traveling with the military and any military-imposed constraints on access” (Paul and Kim, 2004). In the most recent study of 85 journalists assigned to the Iraq War (45 of whom were embedded with military units), no differences were found between unilateral and embedded journalists on indices of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, psychological distress, and substance use (Feinstein and Nicolson, 2005).

In this study, rather than focus on the traumatically stressful experiences of war reporting which have been examined previously, we aimed to explore factors associated with occupational stress and job satisfaction in two distinct groups of media personnel assigned to work on the Iraq War (2003): (1) embedded media personnel (those reporting within military units), and (2) unilateral media personnel (those working outside of military units, often independently or in small teams). Using qualitative methodologies we explored how workplace demands, decision latitude, and social support (JD–C); the balance between perceived effort and reward (ERI); and the experience of working in hazardous environments contributed to positive and/or negative health outcomes in media personnel.
Methods

This was a cross-sectional qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews. Potential interviewees were obtained from two international news organisations that provided lists of staff that either worked as embedded media personnel or unilateral media personnel. We predicted a 50% response rate to the research given: a) only work email addresses were provided as contact details; b) the geographic spread of media personnel; c) the time delay (one year) between the end of the Iraq assignment and the commencement of the research; d) the itinerant nature of media personnel who frequently undertake assignments away from their home base. As such we over sampled both groups in order to achieve a minimum sample of 20 in the groups.

Individuals were randomly selected from lists provided by the news organisations. Initial contact was by email and the interviews were conducted by telephone at a time convenient to the journalists after obtaining informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the King’s College London ethics committee. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours followed a semi-structured interview schedule investigating experiences before, during and after return from the assignment. Interviews were conducted by social scientists and were audiotaped with the permission of the individual. The researchers wrote extensive notes and data were analysed by two of the authors [ST and CD].

Interviewers did not specifically define what stress meant instead they allowed each respondent to comment on experiences that they considered as being stressful. Also, although mental health disorders and symptoms often formed part of the interview discussion, no attempt was made to force interviewees to classify whether they had suffered from a clinically significant disorder or whether they had experienced symptoms of sub-clinical significance. The lack of forced guidance was intended to allow interviews to collect data that was deemed important to the respondent rather than data which might have otherwise have met preconceived constructs.

The constant comparative method of analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data obtained (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Raw data were broken down into text segments which shared similar themes which were then grouped into initial sub-categories, each containing data with common themes. Sub-categories were constructed were allocated a descriptive title by the investigators. Further analysis was undertaken to group overlapping sub-categories by comparing similarities or differences in order to identify main categories with unique themes. Constant comparative analysis permitted a conceptual theory of potential barriers to informed consent to be formulated, with main categories and key themes identified. In the results, quotations have been used to illustrate these themes. The qualitative software package QSR NVIVO (2.0) was used to assist with the organisation of data. Categorical quantitative data were analysed using chi-squared statistics and continuous with independent t-tests. Quantitative data were analysed using STATA (version 8.1).

Results

The sample frame included 73 media personnel from both the BBC and Reuters news agencies. The response rate for the study was 74% (n = 54). Of these 31 were embedded journalists and 23 unilateral personnel. Of the remaining 19 personnel, 4 were unwilling to participate. The other 15 individuals either did not respond to emails or
telephone contact, or the contact details provided were no longer valid. We envisage that this was because of outdated contact details for the individuals, that some individuals were on assignment where email contact was not readily available, or that individuals rarely checked their work email address. Non-responders were contacted three times before being excluded from the sample. The majority of embed and unilateral personnel were outside the United Kingdom (UK) at the time of the interview.

The mean age of respondents was 40, 67% (n = 36) were males, 69% (n = 37) were either married or had once been married, 80% (n = 43) had previously been assigned to cover conflicts zones (including Afghanistan, Chechnya, Israel, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Rwanda) and 37% (n = 20) had returned to work in Iraq since the 2003 war ended. Differences in demographics between the embedded and unilateral groups are reported in Table 1. The only significant difference between the two groups was that more of the embedded journalists were currently or had been married (81% vs 52%; p = 0.026). Qualitative analysis identified five key themes.

**Attitudes about the assignment**

All the embeds and the majority (19, 83%) of the unilaterals reported that they had wanted assignments in Iraq (Figure 1). Four unilaterals feared that their subsequent work would be jeopardised if they did not accept the assignment and 78% of the unilaterals believed that the assignment would a good career move. Most embeds, 41% of the sample, had looked forward to going even though they anticipated that Iraq would be a mentally and physically demanding assignment. The majority of the embedded group had covered conflicts before, and whilst Iraq was an “unknown”, the “great opportunity to cover the story”, and the “personal and professional challenges”, outweighed the perceived risks of the assignment. Four (13%) embeds stated that they wanted to go to Iraq because they were frustrated or bored with their current assignments and four others

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<td>Subsequently returned to Iraq</td>
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*P values derived from chi-squared statistics for Gender, Marital status, Previous conflict and returned to Iraq. Age with independent t-test.
thought it would be good for their careers. Of those who had previous experience in the region (9, 29%) three-quarters felt comfortable returning to Iraq.

Sources of stress prior to departure

Over half the sample stated that they became increasingly stressed and irritable in the lead-up to their departure. Whilst unilaterals reported experiencing more anticipatory stress than embeds before deploying, both groups reported similar causes of stress. The five most commonly reported reasons for stress included: 1) concerns about the use of chemical weapons; 2) uncertainty about the length of time they would be away from home; 3) the welfare of family members whilst they were away; 4) limited time to prepare for the assignment—in particular becoming used to the technical equipment they had been given; 5) being assigned with colleagues they had not worked with before.

Unilaterals also reported being “tired” and “anxious” before departure and spoke about the pressure to “get things organised” and to “get everything together to go”. Some thought that they had been sent to Iraq too soon after their last assignment. Others commented that they had limited management support compared to embeds and were left to “fend for ourselves” or that there was not enough personal support from management. Unilaterals were significantly more likely to report that they feared for their personal safety than embeds ($\chi^2 = 6.52, p = 0.011$). Unilaterals also perceived a much greater risk of chemical weapons being used than embeds.
Participants from both groups commented that family members (particularly parents, spouses and children) were not supportive of their assignment, and were “concerned for my safety” and “afraid”. This was because the story had a “high profile” and the “dangers were more apparent to them”. Despite their family’s fears, the majority thought that their relations were still supportive and “resigned to the realities of the job”. However, seven (13%) said that they had argued with family members more than usual before the assignment. For some, this was because family members were “politically opposed to the war” and did not “agree with me going out”, whilst others stated that they “did not understand why I wanted to go out to Iraq”. Reactions from family members led to stress, worry and anxiety in participants.

**Sources of stress during assignment**

Once on assignment, embeds and unilateral had substantially different experiences. Most land based embeds lived in the desert for a large part of their assignment in very basic living conditions. Eleven (35%) said they were subject to physically and emotionally demanding conditions; with those on land reporting more demanding environments than those embedded at sea. Whilst those embedded with British units generally reported experiencing adequate relationships with the military and respected the units with which they were embedded with, this was not the case for those who were embedded with American units. Those embeds instead reported feeling more isolated and having substantial difficulty in being able to report stories: “The Americans were difficult to build relationships with, and tried to censor us”. Journalists felt that this was because they were not American and as such the soldiers were suspicious. Others thought that American troops did not believe the stories would reach US networks and thus would not be viewed by their friends and family members so saw little utility in interacting with the embeds. Others still felt that the American military personnel were too young and often inexperienced to know how to interact with them. “The average age of the unit was 17”; “I was five years older than the company commander, he didn’t have a clue”. Some embeds with American units had substantial concerns for their safety.

Forty-two percent of embeds stated that after a few days of activity, their assignment was characterised by inactivity and boredom (13). Some were disappointed that there was not more to do during the assignment (5, 16%) and three (10%) stated that they drank alcohol because they were bored. Embeds used a variety of strategies to cope with the conditions they faced in Iraq. These included keeping diaries, putting all their energy into work, listening to music, drinking alcohol, talking with colleagues, or calling or emailing home on a regular basis.

Whilst initially unilateral stayed in hotels, camped, or stayed in accommodation specifically provided for media personnel; over half (12, 52%) reported that living conditions deteriorated during the assignment and said they were unprepared for such difficult living conditions. Some found it more difficult to cope with their assignment as it progressed. For example six (26%) described the negative effect of competitiveness between news teams “chasing the same stories”. Six (26%) others commented that the pressure to “be the first to a story” led to unsafe conditions and unnecessary risk taking (26%). Without military protection some stated that they felt “on our own”, “vulnerable” and “often in danger” and reported feeling that their safety was often jeopardised. Two (9%) of these individuals stated that they came into conflict with local Iraqis.
Sixteen (70%) knew colleagues who were killed during the assignment, and eight (35%) were directly involved in friendly fire incidents. As journalists started to be killed in Iraq, unilateralists reported that they started to question what they were doing in Iraq: “What is the point of this?” “Were our stories really that important?” “Do they make a difference?” Unilateralists used similar strategies to the embeds to cope with conditions in Iraq including socialising with colleagues, writing letters home, calling home whenever they could, and drinking alcohol. Seven (30%) reported developing close bonds with journalistic colleagues.

Most embeds reported feeling well supported by colleagues in Iraq, whilst less than half (13, 42%) stated they were well supported by management back home. However unilateralists were more likely to report feeling unsupported by management during the assignment. Five (22%) stated that they received little support from management and three stated that there was pressure on them to stay in Iraq even when they had asked to leave.

Experiences on return home

Embeds reported very few physical or emotional health problems on or after their return. Five (16%) stated they had experienced mental health or emotional problems, including “sleepless nights”, “nightmares”, “anxiety” and “depression”. Two sought counselling and two had received ongoing treatment for physical injuries sustained in Iraq. Five (16%) stated that they found it difficult to adjust back to everyday life because of the “adventure” and “emotional and physical toll” on their health and because they felt “people could not understand” what they had been through and the “intensity of the experience”.

In general embeds stated that their experience in Iraq did not change how they felt about remaining in the profession. Twenty-five (81%) were pleased with how they performed in Iraq. Five embeds (15%) stated that Iraq was “just another job” and six (18%) stated that they learned a lot about themselves and their relationships with others (including the military) during the assignment. However, seven (21%) were dissatisfied with the assignment, with one stating he felt like “just another cog in somebody’s propaganda machine”. Six others (18%) commented that they would be reluctant to return as they felt Iraq had become more dangerous since the official end to the war and that there were increasing restrictions on what they could report. The latter was predominantly caused by managerial/editorial decisions and restrictions from the military. Four embeds (12%) stated that the experience in Iraq made them appreciate working in non-conflict zones a lot more on their return.

Whilst nine embeds (29%) stated that they received a good welcome home from colleagues, seven (23%) commented receiving very poor support or recognition from management who were “more concerned about the story” than the personal wellbeing of their staff. Six embeds (18%) commented that they felt angry or resentful at how their manager had treated them on their return and were “hurt” by the “lack of recognition” for their work, for instance one manager has said “our embed was viewed as a failure”.

There was a non-significant trend for unilateralists (8, 38%) reporting more emotional difficulties on their return ($\chi^2 = 3.14; p = 0.076$). Indeed five (22%) had sought professional help, such as counselling, as a result of anxiety, nightmares, tearfulness, sleeplessness, depression and an inability to concentrate. Four (19%) commented that they had drank
more alcohol than usual and three reported having argued constantly with their partners since returning home. Four (19%) were seeing psychiatrists at the time of interview; three had been diagnosed with PTSD. Six (26%) were receiving ongoing treatment for physical injuries received in Iraq. Ten (43%) specifically stated that they were relieved to return home.

Thirteen unilateralists (57%) did not want to return to Iraq again, and twelve (52%) were dissatisfied with their assignment. This was because of: 1) a lack of safety in Iraq; 2) pressure to compete for stories; 3) feeling professionally unfulfilled by the assignment. Unilateralists perceived that embeds were better protected and had access to better stories.

**FIGURE 2**
Sources of stress during the assignment

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**Embeds**

“Workload was relentless. [There were] big demands from [management].”

“Dead soldiers don’t affect me as much as civilians in pain, those raped, or suffering. A dead body is a waxwork dummy. The living equals suffering, this affects me a lot more.”

“It was more the boredom I found very hard to cope with. I’m not a big drinker but because of the boredom I did drink a lot more than I usually do. It was social drinking and was an almost daily event.”

“I was expecting more of the war—more action—it was a bit of an anti-climax.”

**Unilateralists**

“The conditions were very grim.”

“We were very much on our own and vulnerable. We formed very close bonds and felt in danger a lot of the time.”

“When people started to be killed, initially things were easy to cope with. We were so busy chasing up what was happening. But as things went on they became more shocking and horrible. A number of incidents happened and it became very scary, we didn’t know what was happening.”

“If the [media] teams had guns there would have been another War in Iraq. There was huge competition between the …teams.”

“Everyone was fed up and we were about to kill each other. We started to hate each other. It was not the people we hated, it was the situation. Crazy. We were not really sharing what we were feeling. We were just drinking you know. We would drink, in terms of sharing.”
Six unilaterals (26%) stated that whilst they were happy with their job, their Iraq experiences had made them less likely to want to work in conflict zones in future. Most unilaterals felt well supported by colleagues on return home; many had socialised with colleagues who had been in Iraq. Unilaterals emphasised the importance of the “shared experience”; “sitting and having a drink”; “I needed to be with colleagues and get angry and have a good cry”. Over half of all unilaterals felt either unsupported or unappreciated by management (13, 57%) especially in that there was limited recognition of the dangerousness of their work. Time off from work to recover from the assignment was seen as particularly important.

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate factors associated with occupational stress and job satisfaction in embedded and unilateral media personnel assigned to the 2003 war in Iraq. Nearly all the participants stated that they had experienced substantial stress before, during or after the assignment to Iraq. Although the danger associated with being in Iraq was a substantial concern for many, a lack of managerial or organisational support and experiencing difficulties with doing an effective job in a war zone were also commonly stated as being substantially stressful. However the majority found that whilst their homecoming experience was not always rewarding, the majority did not report experiencing any substantial impairment of their daily activities as a result of their assignment to Iraq.

Study limitations

Whilst we met our proposed sample size, the response rate for the study was low because 15 individuals either did not respond to emails or telephone contact, or the contact details provided were no longer valid. Accordingly the sample may not be representative of all those assigned to Iraq. Furthermore, the study only provided a snapshot picture of what may be a dynamic situation. Following up individuals over time, may provide further insights into the relationships between hazardous environments, stress and job satisfaction. Lastly there were differences between unilaterals and embeds in terms of marital status and we cannot exclude that some of the differences between the two groups may have been as a result of this rather than their deployment experiences.

Relevance of findings

There were numerous stressors impacting upon media personnel prior to the assignment: 1) those intrinsic to the job, such as limited time to prepare for the assignment, and concerns about how effective a journalist might be at undertaking their job in Iraq; 2) the unknown dangers associated with reporting in a war zone including the potential use of chemical weapons; 3) factors external to the workplace, including concerns about how family members would cope whilst they were away, and personal relationship stressors. Unilaterals were more likely than embeds to report feeling tired and anxious before the assignment, to feel that they had less management support and were more concerned about their personal safety in Iraq. Both groups were concerned at the
high profile of the assignment and the public ambivalence about whether the justifications for going to war with Iraq were valid. A small number reported arguing more frequently with family members prior to departure. Difficulties at home and work

**Embeds**

“I think we really did a good job. I look at the video and stories now and I think that we did the best job that we could have done. We worked so hard and did everything to deliver the best product despite fatigue and bad conditions.”

“Being told that the public don’t want to see any more Iraqi suffering so we can’t report what we want. People were trying to out-do each other to get a story with more gritty, severe, or disturbing images.”

“Other wars have been much worse… reporters act as eyewitnesses reporting back what we see, we need to get in there and show people what is happening. It was a very different sort of war than the others, you couldn’t go over and tell things from the Iraqi side.”

**Unilaterals**

“I have these dreams going around and at the moment I feel stressed. The more nights I drink, the more stories I tell about Iraq to people.”

“Prior to assignment I had a lot of war assignments and definitely wanted to go and was excited as a journalist. After Iraq my priorities have changed. I’m not desperate to repeat it. I’m more focused on staying at home and family. It’s something I’ll always remember but came at the right time ‘I did it’. But now I think about my family.”

“I think that I am drinking a bit much. My plans have changed. I have seen enough things. I am back in school to get a degree. Maybe I’ll do something more editorial. Or stay completely away from this job and do some other job.”

“I received very little support when I returned home. I was made aware of the various counseling options available and given some time off from work. I’m not sure exactly what I wanted from them and can’t put my finger on it, but that I just didn’t feel properly supported by management.”

**FIGURE 3**

Experiences on Return Home
appeared to act cumulatively and diminished journalist’s quality of life outside work. Thus some lost a known to be important buffer against stress in the workplace which is likely to have led to difficulty in coping with day to day adversity (Michie, 2002). As previous studies have indicated the conflict between work and family life in particular concerns about assignment dangers and the uncertainty of the assignment duration were associated with an increase in perceived stress and a decrease in work satisfaction (Burke and Greenglass, 1999; Grzywacz, 2000; Kelloway et al., 1999). This led some participants, particularly those with children, to reconsider whether to deploy to future areas of conflict. However almost all subjects stated that the perceived rewards of the assignment, including career development and the potential personal and professional satisfaction of undertaking a high profile job, “trumped” the pre-assignment stresses and outweighed the perceived risks of the assignment.

During the assignment, journalists experienced both physically and emotionally demanding conditions. For the majority of embeds, the assignment was characterised by reduced autonomy over their daily schedule and an inability to make decisions about what they were able, or indeed allowed, to report. This “censorship” came from either editorial or military imposed restrictions or resulted from being embedded with units which were not directly involved in “front line fighting”. Many were frustrated by the mismatch between what they perceived they would be able to achieve during the assignment, with consequential rewards, and the actual reality of being embedded. For unilateralists the lack of personal safety, the experience of friendly fire, the deaths of colleagues and the pressure to compete with other news teams was associated with decreased job satisfaction and an increase in stress. Unlike the finding by Wong et al. (2003), most embeds did not form close emotional bonds with the military units they were embedded with. Whilst some had professional respect for the units they were embedded with many, especially those with American units, found it difficult to build relationships with service personnel whilst reporting on their activities (Wong et al., 2003). This, in turn, led to increased isolation and at time frustration. As has been reported elsewhere, we found that unilateralists felt pressured, or were prepared to take increasing risks, to be the first to a story (Paul and Kim, 2004).

On returning home there was a non-significant trend for unilateralists to report more emotional difficulties than embeds. However the majority did not report any substantial distress symptoms. Some embeds and unilateralists felt professionally unfulfilled by the assignment because their efforts in Iraq did not result in perceived professional or personal rewards.

The experience of both groups prior to and during the assignment was consistent the dimensions of the JD–C model that is high demands, low control and low support. Embeds felt they lacked the ability to control which units they would be embedded with and experienced reporting restrictions in Iraq which prevented them from effectively doing their job. This was associated with them experiencing stress and poor job satisfaction (de Croon et al., 2002; Wilhelm et al., 2004; de Jonge et al., 2000). Unilateralists experienced living in difficult environmental conditions whilst also being subjected to reporting censorship from their managers. Their stress was compounded by their lack of safety and the deaths of colleagues.

For both embeds and unilateralists there appears to have been an imbalance between their perceived effort and the lack of recognition upon returning home. For many this led to job dissatisfaction which has been shown to be a potential a risk
factor for stress and associated negative health outcomes as suggested by the ERI model (van Vegchel et al., 2005; Siegrist, 1996). Discussing the assignment with other colleagues/friends who had been in Iraq, provided a natural informal support system for many media personnel on returning home. It may have been that although their managers and non-deployed peers could not understand their experiences sufficiently those who had deployed with them were able to express suitable admiration for the considerable efforts expended during their assignments. Thus the satisfaction most respondents reported having gained from interacting with “those who had been there too” represented an attempt to rectify the lack of reward/recognition they had received elsewhere.

Despite the stressors associated with the assignment, embedded and unilateral journalists still went to Iraq, and did the job. Moreover, some returned to Iraq in the year after the official end of the war. Whilst this may be indicative that journalists are to some degree a group of individuals who exhibit a substantial degree of bravado it may also reflect the psychological resilience of individuals attracted to this type of occupation and their exceptional sense of commitment to their jobs. The influence of personal attributes on stress and job satisfaction remains an area for future investigation.

Conclusion

For media personnel, hazardous work environments do not, by themselves, cause significant levels of stress and poor job satisfaction. Rather organisational factors including the imbalance between effort, skill utilisation and perceived rewards of working in such environments, have a greater impact on work related stress and job satisfaction in media personnel assigned to conflict situations. Further research is needed on the long-term effects of occupational stress in media personnel of deploying to war zones, however we propose that future research needs to avoid exclusively examining the traumatic stressors of war reporting and should also investigate occupational factors which are also likely to affect the mental health of journalists.

REFERENCES


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