Developing Psychological Capital to Support Journalists' Well-Being by Maja Šimunjak, Middlesex University London, UK

The issue that this chapter deals with stems from journalism being a high emotional labor job with multiple stressors faced in everyday work. These include, but are not limited to, work conditions such as long and irregular work hours, constant digital connectedness, pressure of meeting deadlines, dealing with abusive audiences, covering trauma and conflict, and so on. Facing these everyday stressors has been found to led to stress, burnout, decreased job satisfaction and performance, and concerning levels of journalists considering a change of profession.[1] Accordingly, this chapter focuses on happiness as subjective well-being, exploring ways in which journalists' well-being can be supported with development of personal resources in the form of psychological capital (PsyCap), including resilience, efficacy, optimism, and hope. Indeed, it is argued that there is a conceptual overlap and evidence of high positive correlations between happiness and subjective well-being, meaning that the two concepts are often used interchangeably.[2] According to Diener and Ryan, subjective well-being is an "umbrella term used to describe the level of wellbeing people experience according to their subjective evaluations of their lives."[3] Importantly, research in the field suggests that high well-being is positively correlated with both better health and job satisfaction and performance, although the causal relationship remains unclear.[4] Hence, supporting journalists' well-being has the potential to benefit them personally, as well as their employers and industry at large.

Research in the field shows that there are multiple and complex interventions that can contribute to an improved sense of well-being. Literature on organizational and social support theory suggests a workers' well-being can and should be supported through several key pillars of support – from the structures of organizational support, over social support from managers and peers to employment of individual-level resources.[5] While organizational and

social support systems are discussed elsewhere in this volume, this chapter focuses on personal resources in the form of psychological capital. It does so by drawing on the research informing development of psychological capital and mapping against it the recommendations for supporting journalists' well-being made by key stakeholders in a 2022 working group held in the United Kingdom. By doing this, the chapter outlines industry-specific interventions that could be useful in development of personal resources for safeguarding well-being amongst its journalists.

Psychological Capital

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is considered a positive psychological state based on a worker's hope, efficacy (confidence), resilience and optimism.[6] These characteristics are viewed as state-like and hence able to be changed and developed, as well as measured.[7] In their seminal work on development of psychological capital, Luthans, Youssef and Avolio define the factors and outline strategies for their development in the following way.[8] *Hope* refers to a state of positive motivation which is focused on goal achievement – it can be developed by practice in goal setting, mental rehearsals for achieving them, and contingency planning for managing obstacles. *Efficacy*, i.e., confidence or sense of accomplishment, is a worker's belief in their own abilities to accomplish goals and manage challenges. It can be developed by experiencing and recognising success, peer support and encouragement (particularly if it entails developmental feedback), as well as participating in mentoring schemes involving observation and imitation of role models.

Resilience is understood as the ability to cope with a difficulty and bounce back from it, and as such, is the only primarily reactive resource in psychological capital. There are three established strategies for developing resilience in the workplace: through asset-focused strategies, such as gaining skills and experience for dealing with issues in the workplace;

risk-focused strategies, such as proactive self-care through healthy eating and regular exercise to minimize risk from stress and/or burnout; and process-focused strategies, including developing emotional intelligence to be able to recognize, understand and manage own and others' emotions which could have potentially negative outcomes.

Finally, *optimism* refers to a positive outlook on past, present, and future events and developments. It can be developed with training in emotional intelligence, which allows workers to actively rethink and reframe thoughts that are driving negative evaluations of past experiences; using positive affirmations to internalize positive outlook on the present; and with encouragement to seek and interpret future developments as opportunities to be welcomed and excited about.

In short, a worker with high psychological capital has 'the confidence to succeed, maintaining a hopeful and optimistic mindset, persevering in the face of obstacles, redirecting and adapting efforts and resources when necessary, and bouncing back resiliently from problems and adversity'.[9] The evidence suggests that higher levels of psychological capital are linked to improved well-being, lower stress, increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, [10] as well as improved job performance.[11]

A range of interventions to develop each characteristic has been developed and tested. For example, it has been found that organizational and social support contribute to efficacy.[12] There is also evidence that psychological capital can be increased with 'microinterventions,' i.e., 1-2 hours long workshops, including online training sessions, which introduce workers to the H-E-R-O resources combined with practical exercises designed to develop each of them.[13] Importantly, as mentioned earlier, there is evidence that high and/or increased psychological capital is correlated, directly or as a mediating factor, with workers' well-being and performance.[14] However, scholars warn that the majority of studies in the field rely on self-reported data, which raises the question of the influence of common method bias and the

social desirability response bias on studies' findings.[15] Also, review of research on psychological capital indicates that the extent of the relative contribution of each component, i.e., efficacy, resilience, hope and optimism, on established outcomes of psychological capital remains inconclusive.[16] And while psychological capital and its relationships with a range of work-related variables have been examined across the world, Da and colleagues warn that there is still much to learn about the role of cultural differences when it comes to the effects of interventions on workers' psychological capital.[17]

Developing Psychological Capital in Journalism

There is little empirical insight into the development or impact of psychological capital in journalism. This is not surprising as the general discussion of journalists' well-being has been neglected until fairly recently.[18] That said, several studies appear to have engaged with individual components of psychological capital. For example, there are studies examining journalists' *resilience*, particularly in relation to those reporting on trauma and conflict.[19] Swart offers an interesting analysis of resilience from the perspective of neuroscience.[20] Her analysis revealed that one of the key issues affecting resilience among journalists was poor quality of sleep, brought about partly with caffeine and alcohol consumption, which contributed to higher stress levels. *Efficacy* has also been occasionally studied.[21] Several studies in the US have examined newspaper journalists' efficacy, often considering it as a counterbalance to burnout. Building on earlier research, Reinardy's 2011 survey study of 770 American newspaper journalists reports increasing levels of exhaustion and decreasing rates of efficacy, indicating that efficacy's ability to mitigate risks from burnout among American journalists is diminishing.[22] Hope and optimism in journalists' population are scarcely mentioned. For example, a rare discussion of *hope* can be inferred from Chen and Javid-Yazdi's conceptual work in which they call for better career counselling in the industry to

alleviate job stress and prevent burnout by drawing on narrative career theory and social learning theory.[23] Another conceptual work, that by Pearson and colleagues, suggests that mindfulness training in the industry could be seen a strategy to develop *optimism*.[24] They argue that engaging in mindfulness-based meditation would enable journalists to develop emotional intelligence, which is one of the key pathways to increasing optimism, as outlined in the psychological capital literature.

There are also several notable industry initiatives, often set to increase journalists' *resilience*, such as training and resources offered by the Rory Peck Trust, Self Investigation, and Headlines Network. British Women in Journalism's mentorship programme can be seen as geared towards developing early career journalists' *efficacy*, but also *hope* (via discussions involving goal setting and contingency planning) and *optimism* (via prompts to reflect and reframe negative thoughts, appreciate the present, and identify career paths). And while the potential benefits of such initiatives are evident, there is rarely clear and public data on their outcomes and achieved impact.

More, of course, could and should be done to support journalists' development of personal resources to manage stressors in their everyday work. Similar initiatives, from which journalism can learn from, have already been taken in related industries. For example, The Film and TV charity has in early 2022 launched 'Mentally healthy productions' toolkit that contains advice on how to protect staff well-being in all stages of the production process.[25] While at a level of anecdotal data, a representative from Offspring Films said in a testimonial that implementing this resource has: "given visibility to mental health issues within production, raised awareness, helped us feel more equipped to provide support within the company, and importantly helped people know where they can find outside support if they need it."[26] Indeed, the charity also offers a set of well-being resources for freelancers, as well as counselling and therapy sessions.[27]

To establish best practice and ways forward in journalism, the working group on journalists' well-being met in the Spring of 2022 featuring a dozen key stakeholders - including representatives of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), British National Union of Journalists (NUJ), Centre for Media Monitoring, European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Headlines Network, Reach, Rory Peck Trust, Society of Freelance Journalists and UNESCO, as well as researchers from Middlesex University, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Amsterdam, and University of Lincoln. These stakeholders exchanged knowledge and best practice in the field and discussed the ways in which journalists' well-being could be supported to benefit their mental health and job satisfaction, as well as the quality of journalism. The working group was organized as part of the project titled "Journalists' emotional labor in the social media era," funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and led by Middlesex University London.

Through discussion, the working group has agreed a set of recommendations for supporting journalists' development of personal resources to manage their well-being at work. As evident from these recommendations, while journalists should seek opportunities to increase their psychological capital, the development of such resource should be supported by wider structures and practices in a systematic manner. Indeed, recent qualitative studies show that journalists often must rely on their personal resources to deal with stressors in the job, with often limited training or support in development of these resources.[28] The key recommendations of the working group,[29] outlined below, demonstrate that the responsibility to equip journalists with psychological capital needed for effective dealing with job stressors should be on a range of stakeholders, and not solely on journalists themselves, including media organizations, editors and supervisors, journalist organizations, training and education institutions, and so on.

Training for development of psychological capital:

- Journalism educators, news organizations, professional associations and unions should offer training, including microinterventions in the form of short workshops, for development of personal resources to deal with occupational stressors in the job. This training can focus on emotional intelligence, resilience, mindfulness, active listening, mental health literacy, and so on.

- Managers/supervisors in news organizations would benefit from training developing their psychological capital, which could enable them to recognize, understand and adequately support their staff when faced with stressors more effectively.

- Good examples include Self-investigation's free courses in digital well-being for journalists and their managers; Headlines Network's resources in how to manage your own mental health and support others; and Rory Peck Trust's resilience programme for freelancers.

Regular briefings and debriefings:

- Journalists should have access to regular briefings and debriefings, in forms of individual and collective critical reflective practice. These can help prepare journalists for challenging aspects of work, assist them in recognizing and understanding their own triggers of stress, anxiety, and burnout, offer support in their efficient management, and contribute to a collegiate and supportive culture of sharing and caring in journalism.

- Developmental feedback should be regularly provided to journalists. This would allow them to identify work processes that are efficient and those that need further

development; plan for contingencies in future work; develop confidence in their work; and more effectively process past actions and identify future opportunities.

- Good practice has been observed in a young digital newsroom in Germany in which the editor has instituted a regular weekly collective debriefing in which journalists talk through the issues they've faced in their work and receive emotional release and support from peers. Also, an informal British peer support network NewsBreak holds informal online chats where journalists can engage in a critical reflective practice.

Structures and systems of organizational support:

- System of regular and meaningful reviews/appraisals that go beyond performance evaluations should be implemented. These should contain developmental feedback, creation of personally valuable, challenging, yet realistic goals with clear timelines and identification of activities that will lead to successful outcomes, as well as planning contingencies for overcoming obstacles in the process.

- Proactive check-in systems should be instituted in newsrooms to enable prevention and/or early detection and support with issues that might affect journalists' well-being. These interventions could involve contingency planning, briefings on assets and processes that are in place to support them, and coaching in practice of "positive self- talk."

- News organizations should adopt the principle of equity wellness, meaning that everyone has a fair and efficient access to transparent and easy to use systems supporting their psychological capital, including, for example, counselling, mentoring schemes, training offers, regular debriefings and career planning.

- There are several good examples of media organizations, but primarily larger companies, following the principle of equity wellness. For example, the BBC and the Guardian, among others, offer their staff free and confidential counselling and therapy sessions, as well as a range of training opportunities aimed at supporting journalists' mental health and well-being.

Practical and emotional social support from peers

- Peer support networks should be instigated, encouraged, supported, and promoted by all stakeholders in order for social support systems, particularly peer-to-peer, to become a resource in developing journalists' psychological capital.

- Peers can offer practical advice and support by, for example, sharing their own risk and stress management strategies, signposting useful assets, and providing feedback. They can also offer emotional support in the form of active listening that allows their colleagues to gain emotional release, including acknowledgment and legitimization of their actions and emotions, which promotes efficacy and a sense of belonging.

- A good example of organizationally led development of social support is Reach plc's 'Online safety rep network' which has been running since 2022. Journalists at Reach can volunteer to be trained in supporting their colleagues in connection to online harms, and hence offer peer support, practical and emotional, when needed.

Each of these recommendations has the potential to develop several if not all elements of psychological capital: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. This matters as it is argued that psychological capital factors interact and, while they can be developed and measured on

their own, an individual's psychological capital is not merely the sum of its parts. Rather, the interaction of components creates a synergistic effect, meaning that they are a stronger resource when combined than each on their own.[30]

Further, in line with the psychological capital literature, there are suggestions here for brief and focused microinterventions, as well as longer term structures and processes that can help journalists' practice and maintain their psychological capital.[31] They represent a clear call for a range of stakeholders, and in particular media organizations, to take more responsibility, and invest more, in supporting journalists in development of personal resources to deal with job stressors. Normative declarations of care for journalists' well-being would not suffice. Rather, in the first place, implementation of these recommendations requires dedication of resources. On the one hand, in terms of paying for services of qualified trainers and employing staff who can organize and support certain structures (e.g., set up and run peer support networks, offer career counselling etc.). On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize the engagement with recommended practices and tools in journalists' workloads, that is, consider undertaking, for example, training or debriefs, not an extra-workload activities that journalists complete in their own time, but integral part of their contracted work hours aimed at personal and professional development, from which the company and industry at large also benefit from in the end. In the second place, setting up structures and processes might not be sufficient on its own in an industry that has historically been based on 'thick skin' narratives and successful workers being seen as those who are able to 'handle it'.[32] Indeed, as discussed in the working group, there is a need for the industry, and in particular media bosses and newsroom supervisors, to not only acknowledge that journalists face a range of occupational hazards in their line of work which often have a negative impact on their well-being, but also to play a pivotal role in normalising the discussions about mental health and well-being in the workplace. Devoting resources to set up and run structures and

processes aimed at journalists' well-being is a good start, yet consistent signposting of these and their incorporation in regular work patterns has better potential to lead to systemic approach to well-being and culture change towards a healthier and happier workforce that seems to be needed in the industry.

Finally, while personal resources such as those discussed in this chapter are deemed instrumental in managing stress, anxiety and burnout which seem rampant in the industry, the care for journalists' well-being should not rely solely on development of journalists' psychological capital. Rather, their personal resources should be one pillar of support, alongside wider elements of the organizational and social support systems, that work in synergy to safeguard journalists' well-being, and consequently also, the quality of journalism.

Notes

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