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THE CAUSTIC POWER OF EXCESSIVE POSITIVITY:

How Vocation and Resiliency Narratives Challenge Librarianship

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INTRODUCTION

Library operations during the COVID-19 pandemic have been under terrific stress, bringing systemic and positional inequalities to the fore. However, even prior to the pandemic, demands on academic library workers were growing through increasing costs, budget cuts, job creep, and other campus and library stresses. Pushing library workers to compensate for underfunding and lack of other support mechanisms, workplaces converge with caustic pressure toward toxic positivity embodied by individualistic solutions. One's critical examination of workplace norms and expectations of service may be regarded as presenting a "negative attitude" when perceived by others. At what point does service to the mission of the organization cross the line into servitude, to the detriment of oneself?

Building on Fobazi Etterh's premise of "vocational awe," Miya Tokumitsu's interrogation of the "do what you love" narrative, and Barbara Ehrenreich's examination of positive psychology, this paper describes the confluence of these forces within librarianship that shifts attention from larger social, political and economic forces onto individuals. We ground our discussion in the broader context of creating a value for labor in the capitalist economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and North America, at the same time that librarianship was developing in the United States. Coupled with Melvil Dewey's focus on efficiency in the early establishment of libraries, and the gendering of the profession into a highly feminized workforce focused on emotional labor, we explore this backdrop in creating challenging environments for workers.

We present too preliminary survey data from library workers in the United States to better understand how aspects of vocation are promulgated through positive psychology and resilience narratives, and other examinations of individual character at the expense of collective action and critical management strategies. We hypothesize that the uniquely American approach to service, work, and leisure creates a distinctive set of challenges in librarianship. We also hypothesize that job class, educational attainment, gender, race,

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and other social identities will impact individual ability to express negative emotions and critical examination of workplace practices. The research we are doing as a result of this paper will expand existing scholarship on aspects of vocation and job satisfaction by examining specific motivations of those seeking library work as it relates to vocation, emotional management, and perceived organizational obstruction.

VOCATION, POSITIVE THINKING, AND LIBRARIANSHIP

In March 2020, Meredith Schawrtz, editor-in-chief of Library Journal opened her editorial with the following statement: "Vocational awe. Burnout. Low morale. Precarity. Undercompensation. Together, the themes I see cropping up in LIS research, conference presentations, and Twitter point to a chronic problem."[1] A year later, these themes are echoed louder and gain more poignancy in light of the pandemic. The chronic problem is now perhaps more acute than ever.

How many of us see our work as a calling in the age of COVID, not to mention in a capitalist society that requires we earn "real money" to survive? How many of us question our profession and its apparent dichotomy between service and expertise, between pleasing and respectability, or simply trying to strike some balance? How many of us go to work, be it in the physical library space or from home, thinking about what it is that we do/provide? What is our worth? How many of us find the need to question our convictions on a regular basis? A survey of literature spanning the themes mentioned in Meredith Schawrtz's statement confirms that many of us struggle with what is indeed a chronic problem in our profession.

Coining the phrase, vocational awe, Fobazi Ettarh argues this concept directly corresponds with problems within librarianship such as burnout and low salary. She notes, "when the rhetoric surrounding librarianship borders on vocational and sacred language rather than acknowledging that librarianship is a profession or a discipline, and as an institution, historically and contemporarily flawed, we do ourselves a disservice."[2] Demonstrating three ways in which vocational awe is manifested, Ettarh breaks down, one by one, false mythologies—from libraries to librarians to librarianship. Drawing on parallels between librarians, monks and priests, Ettarh demonstrates the nature of service, devotion, and impoverishment that librarians subscribe to in their profession, while exposing its absurdity. By uncovering the roots of vocation within librarianship and direct connections to (Christian) religiosity, Ettarh asserts, "Martyrdom is not a long-lasting career." Calling attention to notions of vocation as a method used for eliciting obedience from people in the presence of something bigger than themselves, she is able to connect vocational awe to a weapon used against ourselves. From there on, the road to burnout, undercompensation, and job creep is remarkably well paved.

To be clear, the connection between work and vocation is explicitly rooted in Protestantism. Beginning with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, work was reconceptualized as a duty which benefits both the individual and society as a whole, and religious authority was shifted to the word of God through the Bible and individual faith, not the Church. Presbyterian Calvinists, and other Puritans brought their strict interpretation of the authority of the Bible from Europe to what would become the United States. Entry to heaven was predetermined; the task for the living was to uproot sinful thoughts and activities that were a sure sign of damnation[3]. Self-critical examination for signs that you weren't chosen were only relieved by industrious labor. Relaxation or leisure time was a "contemptible sin."[4] Whether or not folks have embraced the specific theology, the effects of Calvinism have had a tremendous impact on U.S. culture. In 1905, German sociologist Max Weber uses the phrase "Protestant ethic" to describe the concepts of self-critical examination and a focus on productive work.[5] If you've ever felt guilty about asking for vacation time, or have found yourself filling all your time with various tasks because not doing so seems wasteful, you've been socialized to operate under Calvinist expectations.[6]

In the 19th century, industrialization was eliminating the need for many of the productive activities that had been done at home. While many white men were able to switch to various forms of wage labor and entry into professional work, sexism kept white women from doing the same. As a reaction to the strict self-criticism and emotional trauma of Calvinism, many middle-class white women found themselves suffering from a "religious melancholy," or what was called invalidism.[7] Enter Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and New Thought: an approach to healing centered on using one's power of mind to cure or correct one's ill. Building on Quimby's New Thought was patient Mary Baker Eddy who turned New Thought into Christian Science. The core of Eddy's teaching was

that there was no material world, only Thought, Mind, Spirit, Goodness, and Love or Supply. There could be no such things as illness or want; only temporary states of mind.[8] Another patient of Quimby's, William James, considered to be the first American psychologist, became an adherent, blessing this way of thinking as "healthy-mindedness."[9]

As New Thought was receiving the scientific stamp of approval from William James, we see the growth in librarianship as a field. Working in a library was deemed acceptable for white women as the female position was a guardian of cultural ideals. Educational aspects of libraries and overseeing charity for the poor were also suitable fields for white women. Dee Garrison writes in a 1973 article, '…the female librarian worked, (and here Garrison references an 1885 document), "with as distinct a consecration as a minister or missionary…. The selfish considerations of reputation or personal comfort, or emolument are all secondary."[10] Melvil Dewey encouraged educated women who might have otherwise become teachers to consider library careers. The genteel nature of library work would compensate, he believed, for the fact that women librarians normally received half the pay of men and often received even less than teachers did. "…For who else would work for such low pay and do such routinized work?"[11] Surprisingly, most women library workers supported the self-denying and spiritual concerns, or if they didn't, they largely stayed quiet, perhaps not wanting to lose what gains they had achieved in the field.[12]

The early twentieth century brought the efficiency movement formally to librarianship. Frederick Taylor's studies of time and motion, and integration of time-saving devices into labor were embraced by Dewey and other library administrators. Efficiency tests were designed and work tasks were charted to track time spent on various library activities and became measures of productivity which we still find ourselves reporting.[13] William James' 1907 essay referenced New Thought, and Christian Science, noting the common feature of these "optimistic faiths" is they all suppress "fear thought," and instead concentrate the mind on good cheer and good temper, suggesting such practices can "unlock unused reservoirs of … power."[14] While New Thought and positive thinking was supposed to be a healing alternative to self-condemning Calvinism, it retained many of the most damaging features: judgmentalism and constant individual self-examination and emotional monitoring.[15]

Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 publication, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, brought this optimistic faith to the masses. Peale borrowed New Thought strategies such as minimizing obstacles, reciting affirmations to oneself, and "cancelling" negative thoughts with positive ones to his readers.[16] As the work of more and more Americans depended on making oneself more acceptable and likable to employers and colleagues, distribution of Peale's book in workplaces took off in the latter half of the twentieth century. Just think of your work colleagues as a family, and a place where you are loved, a management strategy that evolved in the 1970s as an antidote to union solidarity; your allegiance was to the workplace, not your workmates. The good employee is a positive person, examining their own actions with the promise that by just being more positive, good things would happen, fitting nicely into popular prosperity gospel narratives.[17] When library workers are also disposed to think of their work as a vocation,[18] then doing anything besides showing up to work with a smile is heresy.

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF LIBRARIANSHIP AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

Gendered dimensions of librarianship are evident throughout vast literature and continue to reverberate in many critical examinations of librarianship, past and present. Lisa Slonionwski explores the gendered dimensions of affective labor, focusing a feminist-reading lens on academic reference and liaison librarians. Slonionwski asserts that, "librarians were considered support staff, subservient to the scholarly and pedagogical output of the faculty, despite the fact that much of the work of faculty and students…relied upon the collection building and research help of librarians." The work of librarians, she submits, is undervalued—evidenced by the low profile librarians have on most campuses.[19]

It is also no accident low morale and burnout are so often connected to the role of librarians. Numerous articles discuss emotional labor in academic librarianship affirming this chronic problem. Evans and Sobel consider the emotional labor of instruction librarians by connecting it to the service industry. They focus primarily on the context of what they call "disciplinary silos, collaboration, professional identity, and the work

of academic librarians."[20] As other authors have done, they, too, point to Arlie Hochschild's seminal work and definition of emotional labor as the outcome of dissonance between outward-facing feelings and emotions, and emotions that are truly faced. The negative outcomes of high emotional labor, they assert, "can be destructive, leading to job burnout and low job satisfaction."[21] Evans and Sobel note the role of academic librarians is perceived inconsistently across campuses and has also changed over time. The role of an instruction librarian may not be accurately understood, or it might be perceived based on an outmoded practice. It is not unusual for instruction librarians to repeatedly define their roles to others on their campus, having to explain that they teach, design curriculum, as well as assess student learning. "Having to routinely justify one's place at the table requires considerable emotional labor, strength, and confidence," they write. "Therein lies an incongruence with the external perception of professional identity and the internal professional identity experience by the individual."[22] While their research focuses on instruction librarians, much can be extrapolated to other library workers in public-facing positions.

While emotional labor is not limited to librarianship, the feminized nature of the profession makes female library workers more vulnerable. In "Behavioral Expectations for the Mommy Librarian: The Successful Reference Transaction as Emotional Labor," Emmelhaintz, Pappas, and Seale provide a thorough examination of the expectations for reference librarians. Drawing on the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance for Reference and Information Service Providers* produced by Reference & User Services Association (RUSA), they link the expectations to emotional labor. In employing Hochschild's definition of emotional labor as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value,"[23] they expose the Guidelines' absurdity. Like the flight attendants in Hochschild's study, information services providers are expected to provide a service with a smile, whereby the success of their job performance is measured by their behavior. The *Guidelines* are even put forth for managers to use as an evaluation or training tool. The qualitative content analysis of the study suggests that "the *Guidelines* formalize an expectation that librarians perform emotional services for other people, even as the formal nature of their work is framed as skilled research guidance or professional consultation" (33). They further assert that, "What is arresting about the *Guidelines* is that they focus not just on the *procedure* of reference, but on the *behavior* of the librarian" (34). This moves the *Guidelines* "beyond documenting tasks ('what to do'), and into the realm of telling professionals 'how to be.'" Consequently, the librarian's demeanor and behavior become a "site of judgement" in which "the positive or negative behavior of the librarian …becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure of the interaction" (34). The emphasis is therefore placed on patrons' satisfaction and meeting his/her emotional needs. In other words, it's not the librarian's expertise that determines the success of an interaction, nor profession. According to their analysis, 70% of the *Guidelines* explicitly prescribe themes of emotional labor (39). They note, "What's more, the emotional labor required of the reference librarian in the *Guidelines* is uncanny in its resemblance to the emotional labor required of mothers, girlfriends, wives, hostesses, and servers, and flight attendants" (39). In their consideration of how reference librarians are taught to foreground emotional labor in patron interactions, the authors demonstrate how the *Guidelines* reinforce the gendered service of reference work. They write, "The tension between patron-centered librarianship and meaningful professional autonomy for the librarian becomes evident: if we erase ourselves, how can we be seen?" (41). Reading the RUSA Guidelines today, and especially in this context, makes it difficult to think of them as anything but a satire.

BURNOUT, LOW MORALE, AND TOXIC POSITIVITY

Burnout as an outcome of emotional labor is borne out in a study by Matteson and Miller. Like other studies, theirs too suggests librarians are asked to express positive emotions and suppress negative ones. According to Matteson and Miller, "The emotional gap created when employees must fake their way through an event at work without going through the process of altering their own emotions takes its toll on individuals."[24] The loss of autonomy over one's freedom to express naturally felt emotions, they maintain, strains library employees. In other words, librarians experience a disconnection among their naturally registered emotions, their perceptions of the emotional job requirements, and subsequent expression of those emotions. Such dissonance, they propose, is associated with increased rates of job burnout and decreased job satisfaction.[25]

The library profession, Colon-Aguirre and Webb contend in an exploratory survey measuring burnout among academic librarians, is misunderstood as a low-stress job.[26] Characterization of burnout points to, among other things, an imbalance of social environment, work overload, lack of control over work, and lack of reward. They identify three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness (704). Librarianship, along with other human service professions, experiences a high level of emotional labor. Instruction librarians experience the "full syndrome of burnout" for exhibiting high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished sense of personal accomplishment (705). Basing their discussion of burnout among librarians and academics on a variety of studies and surveys, Colon-Aguirre and Webb maintain results point to "a lack of personal agency as the primary contributor to a sense of burnout and that many liaisons feel significant levels of overwork and lack of fair treatment" (705).

Jennifer Nardine investigates incidence and acuteness of work-related burnout in subject liaison librarians. Her study is seen as the first formal inquiry into liaison librarian burnout in which questions were developed specifically for them. Applying both the Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Areas of Worklife Survey (WAS), her findings reveal the lack of personal agency as the main contributor to a sense of burnout. Nardine explains the combined results from both instruments show "a significant disconnect of liaisons' lived experiences from their desire for both Reward and Community. Of all measurable categories, this mismatch best explains the population's frequently expressed sense of burnout."[27] She concludes liaisons experience "significant levels of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization across all examined variables" (522). According to Nardine, further research into potential burnout mitigation strategies would move the initial assessment from investigation to practical applicability, something she suggests, "would benefit both the individual and systemic levels of academic librarianship" (523). She implies that, considering the many negative effects burnout has on job performance, it would be to organizations' advantage to implement burnout plans. As she puts it, "These plans can, in turn, decrease costs associated with rapid employee turnover and significant absence due to illness, increase cohesive work toward overarching goals of both library and institution, and demonstrate employees' value to the organization, thus creating a positive feedback loop" (523).

In "You Too, Can Prevent Librarian Burnout," Jennifer Bartlett notes ever-increasing demands for service, understaffing, budget cuts, heavy workloads, low pay and other factors as contributing to burnout. As library managers, she poses, "how can we most effectively address burnout in our organizations, not only our own, but those of our employees? Are there any solutions for preventing occupational burnout in librarianship?."[28] Referring to a number of resources on the subject, Bartlett notes it is possible some of the difficulty may lie in a lack of recognition of librarian burnout by those whom they serve. She alludes to a connection between work-related stress and burnout to role ambiguity and role overload. Regardless, it is clear that its negative effects require organizations to make changes. We need to examine how aspects of Taylorism continue to influence how we measure our work, and value, to the organization and to our communities and develop new strategies.

It should come as no surprise that emotional labor and burnout lead to low morale. In her important study, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians," Kaetrena Davis Kendrick calls attention to critical issues that include workplace and emotional abuse, toxic work environments, lack of communication, mistrust, systemic influences, and long-term consequences of low morale on LIS career trajectories.[29] Her study determines that academic librarians who experience low morale, "contend with abusers of dysfunctional systems, policies, or procedures from two levels: the immediate library environment and the larger campus climate"(876). Relying on her data analysis and interviews, Kendrick demonstrates the depth of the problem. Her study points to critical issues that include workplace and emotional abuse, conflicts between colleagues, toxic work environments, lack of communication, mistrust, not feeling valuable, and impact on outlook. From within the library to the larger organization, she calls attention to a failure of leadership in handling issues of low morale. She notes that, "Participants described how campus administrators and human resources limitations hampered efforts to end their low-morale experience" (865). Low morale, Kendrick holds, produces long-term effects. Even long after an experience or a reduction of its impact, participants described ongoing reduced professional confidence or low self-esteem. She writes, "Participants also felt increased levels of skepticism and mistrust towards supervisors, colleagues, and library or campus administrators" (866). Perhaps most unsettling is her notion of enabling systems. As she pointedly argues, "There are systems unique to academia or librarianship and common to the

workplace that enable the development of low morale" (869). With or without faculty status, human resources limitations are identified as perceptions of librarianship. Participants shared that they were targeted, in part, by offenders who didn't view librarians as colleagues, or didn't understand the role or value of librarians, echoing themes seen in Nardine's work. In terms of leadership, Kendrick asserts that, "All respondents mentioned that absent, ambivalent, laissez-faire, or apathetic leaders significantly contributed to their low-morale experience" (871). Furthermore, she notes that when respondents started to mitigate their experience, dealing with enabling systems resulted in feelings of uncertainty or mistrust; participants realized that they would not get what they sought through formal institutional systems due to poor leadership or de facto organizational culture (872). "In this study," Kendrick concludes, "negligence is also where many of the factors traditionally recognized as low morale convene, especially with regard to poor leadership, ineffective communication, and feelings of being undervalued" (875). Low morale, she posits, may be a piece of a larger puzzle. Her study affirms that academic librarians who experience low morale "contend with abusers of dysfunctional systems, policies, or procedures from two levels: the immediate library environment and the larger campus climate" (876). With the data she collected, Kendrick opens the door wide for further areas of study, including the role of administrator/formal leader disregard in low workplace morale.

If emotional labor, burnout and low morale are not enough to contend with, toxic positivity in the workplace adds another slap. Whether exacerbated by the pandemic or not, the requirement to keep or express only positive thoughts is ludicrous, not to mention unrealistic. Megan Wildhood observes, keeping only positive thoughts in your mind, and working on your outlook even as work hours and possibly benefits, too, get cut doesn't put food on one's table.[30] Keeping your 'mindset in check,' she argues, as those in power are advising everyone else to do doesn't work. In her view, people in power would love for us to believe that we aren't at the top with them. "Telling individuals to stop focusing on 'what they can't control,'" she alleges, is not only gaslighting, it's inaccurate." She articulates that, "Demanding positivity is gaslighting of the highest order. It's no surprise a culture such as ours would turn to positivity policing instead of creating robust systems of support, mutual aid and care." Our culture, she says, encourages everyone to "cut toxic people out of your life" but without defining what toxic is. She asks, "Does automatically labeling difficult things 'negative' count?" Identifying it as a "cult of positivity," she argues that preaching positivity is deeply alienating and tone deaf, dismissive and selfish. Wildhood rightly, and eloquently writes, one doesn't need to know where every old emotional injury comes from in order to eradicate it. It's assuming that "negative" emotions need to be eradicated at all that is the problem. She calls upon us to help stop the spread of toxic positivity by allowing **all** feelings in one self. This rings true not only in pandemic time, but also in what we might *now* call "normal" times. It should be true at all times.

STUDY

Our research combines aspects of identifying one's work in libraries as a vocational calling with experiences of expected emotional labor and emotional modulation. There are two components of our study: a survey, and semi-structured interviews. For the study, we sought adults working in academic libraries in the United States. We recruited participants through sharing a link to the survey through our personal social media outlets (Twitter, Facebook) as well as on professional listservs, encouraging others to share the survey with colleagues and other library workers. We used hashtags such as #Librarianship #LibraryWorkers #Libraries #VocationalAwe and #EmotionalLabor to expand the reach of our postings.

It seems important to note our own positionality as aspects of our research will examine how expectations impact library workers representing marginalized identities. We are both white cis-gender straight women, currently working in mid-career staff librarian positions at private schools. We both are currently able-bodied, and Jewish. Ginny Moran is a first-generation college student, growing up in Nebraska in a working-class family. Talia Nadir is an Israeli immigrant to the United States. She grew up on a Kibbutz, which is rooted in socialist ideology.

The survey asks questions about individual motivations for choosing work in academic libraries as well as expectations of emotional regulation and expression in the workplace. We also ask for demographic information to help us categorize responses. Within the survey, participants are asked if they would be willing to be contacted

for an interview with the researchers. Contact information is collected in a completely separate online form that must be chosen by the participant to visit in order to keep contact information separate from any survey data submitted.

At the time of writing, we are still collecting data through the survey and have not yet started any of our planned interviews. Because this study is in the active data collection stage, we are unable to share more detailed data as we had originally planned. However, we have noticed a few themes emerging from text responses:

- When interacting with patrons, many survey participants noted a distinction between being courteous and professional versus friendly and cheerful.
- For most survey participants, positive emotions for working with patrons come naturally which they attribute to their own enthusiasm for the work and care for students.
- Survey participants made clear distinctions between interactions with patrons compared to colleagues in terms of allowed emotional expression, noting that the range of emotions they could express was greater with colleagues.
- When considering emotional modulation among colleagues, participants who self-identified as being in management positions expressed they were less likely to feel they could express feelings or emotions other than empathy;
- Many survey participants noted pressure to always be positive around colleagues, even when they were the recipients of bullying or other toxic behaviors, or were speaking out against observed bullying or toxic behaviors;
- Some comments suggested that displaying negative emotions among colleagues was unprofessional;
- While most respondents felt their work was valued and recognized by supervisors and immediate colleagues, there were strong feelings of invisibility and lack of value, particularly outside of the library.

We are looking forward to seeing the final results in the survey and sharing more detailed information including interview data in a future publication.

CONCLUSION

Librarianship in the United States is subject to a number of factors that can create poor working conditions: a focus on personal emotional regulation that is steeped in Calvinist practices, a capitalist system that values "productivity" also stemming from Protestant heritage, and service expectations requiring the library worker to set aside their own needs. Emotional modulation expectations and individual values for choosing work in libraries may conflict with our own best interests, and Taylorist management strategies pit individuals against each other and against their own selves. These scenarios are so integral to twenty-first century work life in the United States that we don't even see them anymore until they are pointed out to us. We hope this work makes these systems of oppression visible.

NOTES

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5. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.
6. Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided*, 76; "Max Weber's the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism—Video—Films On Demand," accessed April 8, 2021.

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