


The Burden of Proving Burnout in Academic Library Workers

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Article abstract

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The phenomenon of burnout can be understood as a symptom of larger labour concerns throughout libraries and other workplaces that result from an overreliance on (quantitative) evidence-based paradigms and the mining of affect in service of "workplace wellbeing." Library innovation, then, improves the functioning of the library for users in a model where the library is not a workplace and the library workers are not considered a user group. In some cases, library resources receive far more consideration and care than the people working in the library both in terms of space and support.





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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: *burnout · exploitation · extraction · labour*

RÉSUMÉ

Les paradigmes actuels d'évaluation, de mesure et de pratiques fondées sur des preuves dans les bibliothèques, qui éclairent l'action (ou l'inaction) administrative et managériale, construisent un fardeau de preuve indu pour l'épuisement professionnel (et d'autres conditions de travail négatives) qui prive les bibliothécaires des soins et des interventions nécessaires pour qu'ils et

elles s'épanouissent sur leur lieu de travail et cela conduit à des pratiques d'exploitation et à une extraction émotionnelle continues.

Souvent, l'épuisement professionnel doit être prouvé par des processus quantitatifs plutôt que qualitatifs, et le manque de données quantitatives permet aux administrateurs et administratrices d'ignorer la prévalence de l'épuisement professionnel. De même, lorsque des solutions à l'épuisement professionnel sont envisagées elles sont abordées sans tenir compte des besoins individuels des travailleuses et travailleurs. En mettant l'accent sur la quantification, nous obscurcissons bureaucratiquement l'individu en faveur d'une pluralité et développons des solutions qui servent celles et ceux qui sont au centre mais pas dans les marges.

Le phénomène de l'épuisement professionnel peut être compris comme un symptôme de préoccupations plus larges en matière de conditions de travail dans les bibliothèques et autres lieux de travail qui résultent d'une dépendance excessive à l'égard de paradigmes (quantitatifs) fondés sur des preuves et de l'exploitation de l'affect au service du « bien-être au travail ». L'innovation en bibliothèque améliore donc le fonctionnement de la bibliothèque pour les utilisatrices et utilisateurs dans un modèle où la bibliothèque n'est pas un lieu de travail et les employé.e.s de la bibliothèque ne sont pas considéré.e.s comme un groupe d'utilisatrices.teurs. Dans certains cas, les ressources de la bibliothèque reçoivent beaucoup plus de considération et d'attention que les personnes qui y travaillent, à la fois en termes d'espace et de soutien.

Mots-clés : *épuisement professionnel · exploitation · extraction · travail*

IN *Thin Skin: Essays*, Jenn Shapland discusses Marie Curie's unwillingness to accept that radium was poisoning her: "This scientific refusal to believe what is obvious because it cannot be proven, because it is technically uncertain, accompanies our understanding of toxic substances to this day" (2023, 20). In libraries, this scientific refusal fuels toxic administrative responses demanding quantitative assessment and proof of value. As a feminist intervention into science and technology studies, Donna Haraway (1997) critiques the practice of modest witnessing, whereby a scientific experiment is conducted and then presented objectively purely through facts.¹ This knowledge-building process ignores the researcher's subjectivity and precludes the researcher from considering the impact of their own sociocultural positions. Or rather, it ignores certain researcher's subjectivities, to construct the "specifically modern, European, masculine scientific form of the virtue of modesty" (Haraway 1997, 23). Reflecting on this way of doing science, one might refuse to believe the

1. It's worth considering that objectivity need not be wholeheartedly abandoned but rather that the positivist idea of objectivity requires critique. Sandra Harding (1992) presents a feminist notion of objectivity through feminist standpoint theory, which she refers to as "strong objectivity." Such an approach may have value in consideration of burnout and other negative workplace phenomena. In fact, critical and poststructuralist paradigms may provide fruitful ground for considering evidence and social science research that provide far more value to libraries and library workers than (post)positivist approaches.

obvious because it cannot be or has not been proven (within an ideologically narrow view of what counts as evidence and proof). This ignorance to the obvious (under the guise of objectivity and positivism) allows library administrators to disregard anecdotal evidence in favor of a scientific desire for quantitative evidence, ignoring the variety of evidence available to develop understanding and inform action.

The phenomenon of burnout can be understood as a symptom of larger labour concerns throughout libraries and other workplaces that result from an overreliance on (quantitative) evidence-based paradigms and the mining of affect in service of “workplace wellbeing.” The resultant datafication and quantification are indicative of extraction, specifically “extraction that enhances both productivity and predictability—elemental aspects of contemporary capitalism and culture that speak to our relentless drive for more sources of surplus value and more surveillance, and thus certainty and control” (Padios 2017, 208).² Datafication and quantification become both the methods of surveillance and the methods of demonstrating library value by counting and communicating levels of productivity for both library managers and those who would “invest” in libraries. The management of workplace wellbeing then becomes simply a way to ensure continued productivity—a productivity that follows a positivist conception of growth in which productivity must continually increase linearly despite the real impossibility of such an imaginary (e.g., productivity has a ceiling; productivity fluctuates).

We use burnout as a specific example that typifies this process and demonstrates the ways in which quantification and datafication contribute to and are essential for exploitation and extraction in libraries from library workers, leading to negative workplace conditions and outcomes. In developing this argument, we move from the specific (burnout) to the general (exploitation and extraction).³

Burnout

The scientific refusal to believe what is obvious is common in relation to burnout—“a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress

2. We recognize that extraction, and especially extractivism, have contested definitions and, though our application is in this specific context, future scholarship could benefit from more explicit engagement with extractivism as a colonial and postcolonial project, and with a “gathering sense of urgency and planetary emergency” (Szeman and Wenzel 2021, 515).

3. As a result, this article takes the approach of an inductive argument as counter to the specific type of scientific desire for deduction, which we critique.

that has not been successfully managed” (World Health Organization 2024).⁴ Rather than believing librarians when they say they are burnt out or that burnout is prevalent, it has to be proven through scientific processes. David P. Fisher enacts this particular process in a 1990 journal article entitled “Are librarians burning out?” In the face of anecdotal evidence, Fisher, operating within a positivist framework, demands further empirical evidence to believe that librarians are burnt out. That is to say, that individuals clearly claim that they are burning out, but part of the demand for empirical evidence is in the desire to demonstrate a significant-enough quantity of burnout. This demonstration of significance and the question of what is significant is also gendered, racialized, and informed by power. Haraway (1997) observes that in the Enlightenment era, “[w]ithin the conventions of modest truth-telling, women might watch a demonstration; they could not witness it” (31). Whether or not women were present for a demonstration, their presence was never recorded, obscuring them through the processes of documentation. In a field predominately made up of women but disproportionately led by men, the unwillingness to believe librarians is troubling (Olin and Millet 2015). Perhaps the fact that many librarians insist that burnout is prevalent is evidence in itself that burnout is prevalent among librarians.

Quantification

Frequently, burnout has to be proven through quantitative rather than qualitative processes. The lack of quantitative data allows administrators to ignore the prevalence. Similarly, when solutions to burnout are considered, they’re approached without consideration of individual worker needs. An ineffective solution is given to a librarian without their input and frequently one solution is developed to fit every worker in the institution. The entire process then avoids any attention to the individual.

This process of quantitatively providing proof of burnout can be costly. The Maslach Burnout Inventory, a leading tool for measuring burnout among human services professionals, can cost up to \$2.50 per participant to administer (Maslach and Jackson n.d.).⁵ For internal purposes, administering the survey to a 50-person library would cost \$125.00. For a research project, administering the survey to 350

4. Following Christina Maslach and colleagues’ identification of the dimensions of burnout, central to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), they identify three related dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional ineffectiveness (Maslach and Jackson n.d.; World Health Organization 2024). They clarify that “[b]urnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life” (World Health Organization 2024).

5. Free alternatives to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) exist, including the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) and the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). The former has gained popularity in library scholarship in recent years (Wood et al. 2020; Demetres, Wright and DeRosa 2020; Johnson 2024).

research participants would cost \$612.50. In the grand scheme of library budgets, these numbers may seem minimal; however, the cost of measuring burnout is only a cost to initially convince administrators of burnout's prevalence.

In this process, libraries pay to prove that librarians are burning out, and then pay consultants or trainers to teach them how to prevent or mitigate burnout or how librarians can mitigate their own burnout. In the process, libraries continue to extract the same exploitative labour from librarians while consultants extract fees and time from libraries and librarians. An institution may weigh the costs of measuring burnout against the cost of constant recruitment due to burnout-inspired turnover and consider the latter easier to bear.

Burnout is only one example of how this process of extraction occurs, creating the appearance of action without moving the needle. Burnout typifies the problems inherent in the administrative desire for quantitative evidence-based practice. In this regard, too, the work of librarians is constantly quantified, but the work of the library to support librarians eludes measurement. The result is administrative negligence and institutional harm.

Through the focus on quantification, we bureaucratically obscure the individual in favor of the mass, and develop solutions that serve those at the centre but not the margins. Reflecting on Helen Verran's (2000) work on the bureaucratic and colonial process of the British census in Ibadan, Diane M. Nelson (2015) observes

that 'counting us right' is less the loss of the rich, personal story to the cold numeric fact or the collective, embodied, and traditional dissolved into the singular, modern, and individual than about constant scalings and repetitions, the two-faced peculiarity of counting as both to calculate and to make meaningful. (84)

This peculiarity is present, too, in our thinking about burnout in workplaces. An individual's burnout is made meaningful through counting and through quantifying both the phenomenon and its presence throughout the field. However, as a result then, the solution to burnout is also presented at scale, potentially missing solutions that matter to the individual.

In examining populations at scale, we can consider the biopolitical implications of administrative control in arbitrating truth (an enactment of knowledge-power). In articulating the concept of biopolitics, Michel Foucault (1990) refers to the "regulations of the population" (139), referencing "the evaluation of the relationship between resources and inhabitants" (140) as an example. In the entanglement of biopower with capitalism, labour becomes biopolitical. As a simple and revealing example, health insurance being tied to employment means that losing or giving up employment has specific implications for life vis-a-vis health, which becomes an

even more troubling conundrum if the reason for leaving an employer is physical and psychological wellbeing. In the explication of biopolitics, Foucault is concerned specifically with populations, which we might imagine here as the totality of a library's workforce or more broadly as the totality of the profession. The implications of each case are different, but the effect of abstraction through quantification becomes apparent. Additionally, Foucault (1990) provides the example of biopolitics mentioned above: "the evaluation of the relationship between resources and inhabitants" (140). The process of evaluating evidence of burnout is also a process of arguing for resources in order to manage and mitigate burnout. In fact, the Job Demands—Resources (JD-R) model of burnout specifically highlights resources (defined as positive aspects of working conditions, such as agency and control) and their effect on mitigating (when provided) or exacerbating (when withheld) burnout (Demerouti et al. 2001). In this way, resource management becomes a biopolitical calculation.

Evidence

It is notable that the turn to evidence-based practice in libraries (as noted by the emergence of publications like *Being Evidence Based in Library and Information Practice* (2016) and *Everyday Evidence-Based Practice in Academic Libraries: Case Studies and Reflections* (2023), and the journal *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*) largely draws from models originating in the health sciences. Although, in the case of burnout (a bodily and mental health phenomenon), using such methods might seem apropos, it is important to be wary (recalling Haraway again) of the reification of dominant paradigms that have been ingrained in those disciplines under the guise of objectivity. Furthermore, the application of such methods by and to a burned-out worker complicates some of the sterilely defined categories of evidence. For example, one of the key components of evidence mentioned in these models are "professional colleagues" or "professional knowledge" (Koufogiannakis and Brettle 2016). What happens when those possessing this expertise are experiencing "professional ineffectiveness," as identified by Maslach and colleagues as one of the dimensions of burnout (Maslach and Jackson n.d.)? Though the goal of the evidence-based practice in libraries (EBLIP) model is to engender a "continual cycle of improvement" (Koufogiannakis and Brettle 2016), one can see how a cycle of burnout may also coincide with, or run counter to, this outcome, particularly against the backdrop of the broader library's ethos that "quantitative assessment of value must be ongoing, seemingly in perpetuity," (Seale and Mirza 2020, 4). When imagined as a process of resource extraction (from library workers) this process of perpetual quantification of value is unsustainable; as such, the extractive nature of quantification and datafication constructs the conditions in which library workers are susceptible to burnout.

Understanding this broader environment in which libraries are constantly required to prove their value is needed in order to contextualize the evidence-based approach (not at all exclusive to burnout). As Maura Seale and Rafia Mirza (2020) explain in their analysis of ACRL's *The Value of Academic Libraries* report, the most pressing demand of academic libraries is to provide evidence of financial value, which must be demonstrated through the production of quantitative data. They argue that this emphasis on quantitative evidence capitulates to a broader neoliberal project in which "... the discourse of library value (and indeed, the field of library 'science') seeks affirmation through an affiliation with reason, empiricism, positivism, and objectivity" (Seale and Mirza 2020, 6). The implications then become: What can't be quantified can't be rational, therefore it can't be believed, and, thus, it can't be acted on to determine solutions.

In a chapter of *Everyday Evidence-Based Practice in Academic Libraries*, Rick Stoddart advocates for integrating critical reflection into the evidence-based practice, beginning with how positionality of the researcher shapes the research question itself (Stoddart 2023). However, we cannot rely on individual reflection alone to transform this approach, just as we cannot rely on individual workers to mitigate their own burnout alone. Nonetheless, it is informative to observe when the individual is invoked and when the individual is ignored. In Denise Koufogiannakis and Alison Brettle's (2016) reference to anecdotal evidence in the EBLIP framework, they argue that "[t]his type of evidence is most frequently frowned upon as not being worthy, but in the absence of anything else it is certainly used" (37). In a sense, this simultaneously clarifies that anecdotal evidence is usable for demonstrating burnout when other evidence of burnout is not present, but it is subjugated to a highly undesirable status that renders it practically unusable. The approach in libraries, among leaders and administrators, in particular, more frequently appears to be to demand other evidence. Can anecdotal evidence not reach a volume worthy of consideration? How many anecdotes are needed and how must they be documented for them to rise to a higher echelon of data? And what does it mean to ignore the daily realities of library workers by dismissing their concerns as anecdotal? One also wonders if the usual administrative burnout solutions (encouraging staff to take breaks and say "no," providing trainings, etc.) are subject to the same pressures to be quantitatively rationalized?

Exploitation

The development and prevalence of the evidence-based practice model in academic libraries, the rise of the neoliberal university, and the administrative obsession with quantification converge to exacerbate the exploitation of academic librarians and lead to emotional extraction. Sam Popowich (2019) argues that "[t]he immaterial,

affective, and intellectual qualities of academic librarianship have all made library labour fit for capitalist exploitation under the new regime of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism” (154). In particular, affective and emotional labour are types of (immaterial) labour that are common in libraries but overlooked by managers, potentially leading to overwork and overwhelm, especially in racialized and gendered ways (Johnson and Page 2022). In the Marxist feminist tradition, Heather Berg (2014) critiques the idea of socially necessary labour, and, though her critique specifically considers sex workers’ labour, her analysis is applicable to the logic that positions librarianship as socially necessary (for example, in the preservation of democracy). She argues that this rhetorical framing “reinforces the tethering of personhood to one’s contribution to systems of value extraction that has proven so devastatingly central to the functioning of neoliberal capitalism” (Berg 2014, 720). Berg’s analysis demonstrates the pitfalls of socially necessary labour but also encourages the consideration of the ways in which rhetoric about the value of libraries constrains us within a capitalist model of understanding our own value.

In a system where burnout must be measured before it is addressed, exploitation becomes simple: continue to exploit workers until they burnout and leave. In particularly devious situations, the newly hired worker then becomes the litmus test for burnout. Interestingly in this case, the singular may represent the plurality (thinking back to bureaucratic scalings and repetitions): the experience of one new worker, not yet worn down, may serve as a single counter-case to invalidate the proposition that current workplace conditions lead to burnout. This logical process is described by Karl Popper as falsificationism, which Isabelle Stengers (2000) briefly describes: “whereas no accumulation of facts, however large, is enough to confirm a universal proposition, a single fact is enough to refute (falsify) such a proposition” (14). Falsificationism was a central aspect of Popper’s critical rationalism, which dismissed inductive reasoning and eschewed objectivity in favor of evaluating knowledge claims through critique and falsification. In this case, the “universal proposition” is that current workplace conditions lead to burnout, and the single fact is the new worker, or the worker resisting burnout. Isabelle Stengers (2000) criticizes this position’s relation to positivism and scientism because it still involves an expected “scene” in which facts are explained through whatever reasoning or logical process to construct “a general theoretical proposition from the facts” (18).

In critiquing this position, we may also question the value of universal propositions, through which we may, again, return to the value of the position of the individual, and thus the hyperlocal proposition. However, this approach illuminates the shifting processes of rationalization used to defer action and continue the perpetual process of collecting data, whether or not that data will ever be used, and

whether or not it will have any material benefit for library workers. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe (2016) has referred to the process of decision-based evidence-making, and, in this case, the shifting logic aids the interpretation of evidence in support of the preconceived (in)decision. When is burnout prevalent enough to be witnessed, and when does that witnessing lead to action? How do the gendered and racialized components of this labour lead to continued exploitation and a continued desire to overlook burnout?

Awe

In addition to the ways that immaterial and affective labour lead to exploitation and a failure to account for the extent of librarian labour, vocational awe situates librarians to sustain our own exploitation and provide a logic for publics to sustain it as well. Fobazi Ettarh (2018) defines vocational awe as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh 2018). In her seminal article, she discusses how vocational awe contributes to burnout specifically and points to two examples of how vocational awe is mobilized to exploit library workers: the managerial expectation that library workers perform tasks beyond their job duties, and a broader expectation that library workers “serve without complaint” (Ettarh 2018), as enforced by managers, coworkers, and anyone else via what Ettarh (2018) refers to as “a vocational purity test.”

In the first instance, library workers are exploited by management wherein a worker’s commitment is tested not by their ability to do their job, but by their ability to do more than their job. This feeling of being called to the work primes librarians for exploitation. Social psychologists Matthew L. Stanley, Christopher B. Neck, and Christopher P. Neck (2023) demonstrate that “managers expected loyal employees to be more willing to make personal sacrifices for the company” (6) and found that managers were more likely to exploit those workers, including asking them “to work late for no reward” or “to do uncomfortable, difficult tasks unrelated to their job duties for no reward” (6-7). Vocational awe’s structuring of the field to create loyal, committed workers who are unwilling to critique aspects of their jobs supported by managers, colleagues, and publics that expect uncritical commitment from them perfectly positions library workers for these types of exploitation. However, there’s a sense of exceptionalism; because librarianship is a calling, the exploitation is a choice, and thus not exploitative. This is compounded for academic librarians by academia’s own sense of exceptionalism—a desire for its workers to somehow not be workers, which is frequently evidenced by our treatment of the work of graduate students. Vocational awe contributes to the desire to be this exception—to see work as not exploitative, despite the fact that all work is exploitative—and this logic situates library workers as ideal candidates for exploitation.

Extraction

The library world's dogged propagation of vocational awe is further compounded by the emotional extraction already inherent in library work. By emotional extraction, we take the two-part definition from American Studies scholar Jan Padios (2017). In the first part of the definition, emotional extraction “involves the transfer of emotional resources from one individual or group to another, such as that which occurs in the work of caring for others” (Padios 2017, 205).

It is especially important, when applying the term extraction in this context, that we eschew a universal approach, and recognize it as a colonial project, as Padios (2017) does, identifying those “whose emotional resources may be more easily exhausted or whose emotional non-normativity make them targets of control” due to race, class, gender, and (dis)ability (208). The way this emotional extraction happens with front-line library staff in particular is well documented, and it most certainly relates to our understanding of who burnout affects, and who it affects disproportionately (Johnson and Page 2022).

The second part of Padios's (2017) definition is interesting to consider in institutional management of burnout: “emotional extraction entails the use of emotion knowledge—or theories about emotions, such as emotional intelligence—to generate conclusions or predictions about human behavior” (205). Padios (2017) outlines the corporate adoption of “emotional intelligence” as something both measurable and desired by organizations “as a means to extract more productivity from employees” (214). Kathi Weeks (2011) has similarly characterized the rise of these behavioral assessment tools (and an increased managerial focus on workers' attitudinal characteristics, e.g. commitment) as an attempt to quantify and extract amidst a changing labour landscape:

When workers are given more responsibility and more direction, particularly when the job involves providing services and instilling in clients and customers certain kinds of emotional or affective states, the workers' performance is more difficult both to measure and to monitor. (70)

Libraries have followed this corporate trend, and the cultivation of positive emotions towards work from a worker, whether it be through the lens of vocational awe or other affective constructions, does not exempt a library worker from burnout; it compounds and obfuscates it. So, why do many organizational approaches to burnout operate in the same arena, touting wellness, mindfulness, and resilience as new emotional aptitudes to acquire?

Perhaps not coincidentally, resilience (like extraction) is also a term of great significance in understanding the Anthropocene. The concept of resilience arose first

in ecological studies in relation to the return of ecological systems to equilibrium in the wake of disaster. It has subsequently been used in various sociological and geopolitical contexts, including as a neoliberal method of the state (e.g., if citizens are directed to develop resilience, they are conditioned to expect less from the state in regards to their safety and welfare) (Winston and Fage 2019). The way libraries employ resilience rhetoric is similarly concerning (Berg, Galvan, and Tewell 2020). This is not to condemn any individual or organization who employs methods of mindfulness or resilience in order to identify and stave off burnout, but it is important to recognize the ways in which these frameworks prime workers for emotional extraction both figuratively and literally (consider how many workplaces provide employees with digital health and wellness platforms). It begs the question, why are libraries willing to concede emotion and subjectivity in the (individual) responses to burnout, but not in the identification of its existence and magnitude in the first place?

Conclusion

Current paradigms of assessment, measurement, and evidence-based practice in libraries, which inform administrative and managerial action (or inaction), construct an undue burden of proof for burnout (and other negative workplace conditions) that denies library workers the care and interventions necessary for them to thrive in their workplace and that leads to continued exploitative practices and emotional extraction. These conclusions are neither surprising nor exclusive to library workplaces, and yet it bears considering that, despite a supposed professional turn to “people-centered” and “user-centered” library philosophies, this care does not extend to those working within libraries. For as long as burnout remains impalpable to administrators until counted, and as long as vocational awe ensures an ample and dedicated workforce, what is the institutional incentive to expend resources on acknowledging burnout, let alone addressing it at its root causes?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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