The Emotional Labour of Public Library Work
Le travail émotionnel du travail en bibliothèques publiques

Joanne Rodger et Norene Erickson

Résumé de l'article

Cette étude vise à étendre la recherche sur le travail émotionnel des employés des bibliothèques publiques. Étant donné que c'est un sujet relativement peu étudié en bibliothéconomie, les chercheurs et les praticiens doivent mieux comprendre les expériences du travail émotionnel du personnel de première ligne dans les bibliothèques publiques. Une enquête qualitative a été distribuée par voie électronique au personnel des bibliothèques d'une province canadienne. Les participants ont décrit des expériences significatives de contact avec les usagers, mais ont également identifié des défis majeurs dans l'exécution du travail de service à la clientèle. Les résultats montrent que le fait de présenter au public une image d'émotions régulées, qui est ancrée dans la formation au service à la clientèle pour les bibliothèques, est souvent en conflit avec les émotions internes. L'incapacité de concilier les deux émotions opposées et un soutien administratif perçu comme limité ont un effet sur le plaisir au travail et sur le bien-être personnel des employés. Les participants signalent que l'épuisement et le burnout sont des conséquences du travail émotionnel. Les organisations de bibliothèques doivent reconnaître l'aspect du travail émotionnel du service à la clientèle des bibliothèques et fournir un soutien formalisé plus important au personnel qui occupe des fonctions de service à la clientèle. En dotant le personnel de stratégies de travail émotionnel plus solides, il est également possible de contribuer à renforcer la résilience et à accroître la satisfaction professionnelle.

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Abstract / Résumé

This study seeks to extend the research on the emotional labour of public library workers. Because emotional labour is a relatively new concept in library and information science research, researchers and practitioners need to better understand the emotional labour experiences of front-line workers in public libraries. A qualitative survey was distributed electronically to library workers in one Canadian province. Participants described meaningful experiences connecting with customers, but they also identified major challenges in performing customer service work. Results showed that the public-facing display of regulated emotions that is ingrained in library customer service training often conflicts with inner emotions. The inability to reconcile opposing emotions and perceived limited administrative support affect individuals' enjoyment of work and their personal well-being. Participants reported exhaustion and burnout as outcomes of emotional labour. Library organizations must acknowledge the emotional labour aspect of library customer service work and provide more extensive formalized support for staff who are in customer service roles. Equipping staff with stronger emotional labour strategies could also help to build resilience and increase job satisfaction.

Cette étude vise à étendre la recherche sur le travail émotionnel des employés des bibliothèques publiques. Étant donné que c'est un sujet relativement peu étudié en bibliothéconomie, il est nécessaire de mieux comprendre les expériences du travail

émotionnel du personnel de première ligne dans les bibliothèques publiques. Une enquête qualitative a été distribuée par voie électronique au personnel des bibliothèques d'une province canadienne. Les participants ont décrit des expériences significatives de connexion avec les usagers, mais ont également identifié des défis majeurs dans l'exécution du travail de service à la clientèle. Le fait de présenter au public une image d'émotions régulées, qui est ancrée dans la formation au service à la clientèle pour les bibliothèques, est souvent en conflit avec les émotions internes. L'incapacité de concilier les deux émotions opposées avec un soutien perçu comme limité a un effet sur le plaisir au travail et le bien-être personnel des employés. Dans le pire des cas, l'épuisement physique et professionnel sont considérés comme des résultats du travail émotionnel. Les organisations de bibliothèques doivent reconnaître l'aspect du travail émotionnel du service à la clientèle des bibliothèques et fournir un soutien formalisé plus important au personnel qui occupe des fonctions de service à la clientèle. En dotant le personnel de stratégies de travail émotionnel plus solides, il est également possible de contribuer à renforcer la résilience et à accroître la satisfaction professionnelle.

Keywords / Mots-clés

emotional labour, public libraries, customer service

travail émotionnel, service à la clientele, bibliothèques publiques

Introduction

Library work is emotional. As the social role of the library redefines expectations of service, the challenges of working in public libraries in particular are greater than ever. The American Library Association (ALA, n.d.) emphasizes the social, economic, and educational role of the 21st century library to help solve social problems and add value to a community. The associated increase in care work performed by library staff may have repercussions on their well-being. Despite extensive training and meaningful efforts to provide professional and respectful customer service, library workers inevitably will find themselves in difficult or charged conversations with customers who may be disgruntled or angry. These emotionally charged encounters challenge library workers' customer service skills and can take a toll on their general well-being.

Emotional labour is the idea that one must regulate their emotions in order to accomplish their job and "deals with the challenges associated with expressing the appropriate emotions as required by workplace or supervisor expectations" (Matteson & Miller, 2014, p. 95). Jobs that include a high level of personal interaction, such as customer service positions, require emotional labour. As a service-oriented industry, public library work involves emotional labour; employees often face highly charged conversations and challenging customer interactions. Research has shown that some workers experience emotional harmony, in which what is felt and what is displayed are compatible, while others experience emotional dissonance, in which there is a discrepancy between what is displayed and the inward self (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). It is in this space of dissonance that an individual's well-being may be

compromised, which may threaten performance outcomes (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

Providing exceptional customer service is one of the core values of librarianship and is emphasized in the ALA's (2008) Code of Ethics, which states, "we provide the highest level of service to all library users" (para. 7). With considerable emphasis placed on the provision of exceptional customer service and the reality that libraries are publicly funded and openly accessible institutions for all, library staff members are held to a high standard regarding their interactions with customers. Emotional labour can provide immense job satisfaction, but it also increases workers' risk of emotional dissonance and burnout (Matteson et al., 2015; Salyers et al., 2018).

This paper reports on a study that investigates the emotional labour of public library work. The research question guiding this study was: How do public library workers experience emotional labour in their work? The sub-questions were: What strategies do public library workers use to regulate emotional labour? What outcomes do public library workers report as a result of emotional labour efforts? Finally, what support is available for public library workers to manage emotional labour? The paper presents findings from a study of library workers in one Canadian province and situates these findings within the context of the existing research on emotional labour, both generally and within the library field. Throughout this paper, people visiting the library or using library services are referred to collectively as customers, except when quoting directly from participants' responses, in which case their terminology is used.

Literature Review

Origins of emotional labour

Hochschild (1983) considered work to be emotional labour when actions require an individual "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Almost four decades after Hochschild's introduction of the concept, emotional labour is now a recognized and well-defined construct within organizational psychology (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). As a sociological concept, emotional labour has been viewed as a way to understand organizational structure and how it may influence the management of emotions in specific service jobs (Wharton, 2009). The gendered nature of emotional work is most prevalent in careers dominated by women (Gray, 2010). In certain gendered careers, such as nursing, emotional work is undervalued, goes largely unrecognized economically, and is not seen as an asset to one's job (Gray, 2010). Organizational scholars have recognized the demanding nature of emotional work, but practitioners in organizations have traditionally focused on the pragmatic aspects of work life (Shuler & Morgan, 2013). Organizations have neglected the emotional aspects of performing jobs, particularly those in the service industry, which includes library work environments (Shuler & Morgan, 2013).

Emotional labour has been viewed as a benefit to workers and organizations (Ashforth & Humphrey,1993). Certain display rules, or expectations of how to act, are fulfilled

either through surface acting or deep acting (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Hochschild (1983) called this public-facing display of emotion something that is "sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (p. 7). Surface acting requires the worker to present a certain emotion to the customer while feeling a different emotion internally (Hochschild, 1983). The worker might also attempt to change their inner emotional state so that they present a more authentic and empathetic display of emotion (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). This is referred to as deep acting, which Grandey and Gabriel (2015) found to be positively correlated to job satisfaction. Each of these strategies requires a varying degree of emotional effort. Surface acting involves suppressing or modifying external behaviour that does not match internal feelings such as frustration, anger, or irritation with a difficult customer (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Deep acting uses "cognitive strategies" (Grandey & Sayre, 2019, p. 132) that help to modify *internal* emotions; attempting to understand and empathize with a customer's frustration is one example.

Hochschild (1983) considered individuals in public-facing occupations to be most closely tied to experiences of emotional labour because these front-line workers are often considered the face of an organization. Display rules are particularly important to follow in these occupations because service providers' behaviour is often the intangible gauge of service quality (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Having to regulate one's emotions, whether through surface acting or deep acting, has an effect on an employee. Both strategies require emotional energy and can take a toll on the individual (Matteson, 2017). Surface acting may increase the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction and job performance (Chau et al., 2009; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Ishii & Markman, 2016; Judge et al., 2009; Rutner et al., 2011). Those who perform only surface acting in their roles also have a higher likelihood of burnout and subsequently quitting their jobs (Chau et al., 2009; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Deep acting can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2013), but it also has positive correlations to exhaustion and job burnout (Grandey, 2003; Kim, 2008; Matteson, 2017). Deep acting, however, can reduce emotional dissonance because it involves less discrepancy between what is felt and what is displayed (Philipp & Schüpbach, 2010).

Emotional labour in library work

There are clear connections between the sociology of emotional labour and the type of work that library staff perform. Emotional labour occurs most often with interactive work involving front-line service (Wharton, 2009), in which much of the job requires constant interaction with clients and coworkers. These front-line jobs are often challenged by "the dynamics of power, status and gender" (Wharton, 2009, p. 150) that arguably fit into the historical pattern and evolution of library service work. Julien and Genuis (2009) offered one of the first connections between library work and emotional labour, which focused on library staff performing instructional work in academic libraries. The authors described how academic librarians deal with emotional dissonance by assuring themselves that a negative experience with a customer was not their fault and could not be avoided; they attempt to gain perspective and rationalize the experience of emotional labour (Julien & Genius, 2009). For better or worse, library workers learn these "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 5) through organizational guidelines and expectations from the profession of librarianship (Julien & Genuis, 2009).

Recently, researchers have explored various facets of emotional labour in library work; notably, professional guiding principles of service and their effect on emotional labour, the effects on job satisfaction and burnout, and how organizations recognize or ignore emotional labour work (see, for example, Emmelhainz et al., 2017; Matteson & Miller, 2013; Matteson et al., 2015; Peng, 2015; Shuler & Morgan, 2013). The difficulties inherent in public library work, including the factors that contribute to stress, are commonly explored phenomena (Jordan, 2014). Stress and burnout are often attributed to the customer service aspect of the work (see, for example, Lindén et al., 2018; Salyers et al., 2018). In part, stress in library work occurs because of an increase in issues such as homelessness and mental health that create more challenging patron interactions (Jordan, 2014). One of the biggest sources of stress in Smith et al.'s (2020) study was "outsider-initiated harassment" (p. 425). This includes instances of verbal or physical abuse and assisting patrons who are dealing with traumatic life situations.

Matteson and Miller (2012) recognized the need to better understand emotional labour and proposed a comprehensive research agenda for further study on emotional labour in library work. They explored a broader spectrum of library workers than in previous studies, which helped to deepen understanding of the effect of surface acting on job satisfaction and burnout (Matteson & Miller, 2013). Shuler and Morgan (2013) pointed out the weaknesses in supervisor and organizational recognition of the emotional labour conducted by library workers. Peng (2015) further considered how supervisor support might be a moderator of emotional labour. Emmelhainz et al. (2017) explored existing discourse in professional guidelines and showed the connection between organizational requirements for behaviour and the emotional labour required in order to satisfy these expectations of conduct. Beyond this research, little attention has been paid specifically to emotional labour in library work; however, it appears to be a growing area of interest in the library sector.

Library work as gendered and affective labour

Historically, jobs that require emotional labour have been performed by more women than men (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009). As a feminized profession, librarianship is characterized by emotional work, which is also historically undervalued (Douglas & Gadsby, 2017). Affective labour, "intended to produce or alter emotional experiences in people" (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 645), describes the historical feminized profession of librarianship. The labour contribution of women was to provide services that may give others a feeling of well-being (Wharton, 2009), hence work that considers others' emotional status as more significant than one's own. Women were considered suitable for professions such as nursing, teaching, and librarianship because of their perceived subservient and nurturing qualities (Garrison, 1977). These female-dominated occupations lacked professional prestige, and the service approach was passive and non-assertive (Garrison, 1977), considered to be in fitting with women's natural strengths. Librarians worked within a bureaucratic system of rules and principles that guided their actions because they were not seen as leaders or professionals in their own right.

Intellectual labour has always been valued more highly than emotional forms of labour, particularly in a capitalist economy (Logsdon et al., 2017; Sloniowski, 2016). However, the "human cost of the undervalued immaterial labour" (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 664) is beginning to receive greater attention in organizational behaviour research (and, more slowly, within library and information sciences) as traditional perspectives of feminized labour are challenged. This research may help to encourage a rethink of the value of affective and emotional labour.

Professional guidelines for public library service

Well-recognized guidelines exist for the execution of customer service in North American libraries; the most well-known are the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA, 2013) *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service*. These guidelines have recently come under scrutiny around emotional labour. In a discourse analysis of the RUSA *Guidelines*, Emmelhainz et al. (2017) showed that the *Guidelines* emphasize how to manage patrons' emotional needs as opposed to their informational needs. This further reinforces the notion of library work as gendered and affective labour. Emmelhainz et al. (2017) referred to this as opposite to an "ethics of care" (p. 41) mentality, which considers both participants as equal contributors to the success of a transaction. Instead, the *Guidelines* place "responsibility for the success of a reference interaction solely with the librarian, her self-conduct, and her emotional labor" (Emmelhainz et al., 2017, p. 41). Hochschild (1983) would label this responsibility as "feeling rules" (p. 56), which represent the act of managing one's feelings in order to produce an outward display of acceptable emotion. Hochschild (1983) considered this strategy to be a concern because it forced internal emotions to be in sync with outward countenance, thus threatening an individual's authenticity of self.

The RUSA (2013) *Guidelines* clearly identify recommended customer service behaviours. The Approachability section, for example, suggests that library workers should be "...poised and ready to engage patrons" and should "acknowledg[e] patrons by making initial eye contact, employing open body language, or using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation" (sec. 1, paras. 2-6). Similarly, the Interest category suggests these ways to engage: The library worker should "…demonstrate a high degree of objective, nonjudgmental interest in the reference transaction" (sec. 2, para. 1). There is a claim that librarians "who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of their patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users" (sec. 2, para.1). The Listening/Inquiring section also suggests specific emotional expectations of the library worker, who "communicates in a receptive, cordial manner … uses a tone of voice ... appropriate to the patron … maintains objectivity; does not interject value judgments" (sec. 3, paras. 3-11).

Library service standards such as the RUSA (2013) *Guidelines* clearly stipulate what is expected in terms of service and management of emotions. These guidelines make expectations for delivering customer service clear, yet no self-regulation strategies exist in the library and information sciences field to help counterbalance the effects of providing high-level, empathetic service.

Strategies to manage emotional labour

Studies in other disciplines demonstrate the toll of emotional labour on workers and provide recommendations such as employee assistance programs, administrative and professional association support (Cricco-Lizza, 2014; Funk et al., 2017), and mindfulness training (Hülsheger et al., 2013). In library and information sciences, there is burgeoning research surrounding the role supervisors, management, and administration can play in supporting library workers (see, for example, Julien & Genuis, 2009; Matteson & Miller, 2014; Peng, 2015; Shuler & Morgan, 2013). While strategies can be borrowed from other disciplines further along in their understanding of the effects of emotional labour, there is a benefit to focusing on what is unique to the practice and experiences of the library community (Joe, 2019), particularly in light of the growing social role of the library.

Shuler and Morgan (2013) suggested that managers, supervisors, and administration actively recognize and aid support staff who perform emotionally charged work. Acknowledgment of emotional labour would help staff to manage emotional work in a more receptive and willing way. Matteson and Miller (2014) asked administrators to consider varying levels of potential organizational response that can help alleviate the effects of emotional labour. Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this approach organizes different responses from surface- to deep-level, from providing basic support during incidents to considering changes to organizational culture that facilitate a more positive and supportive work environment (Matteson & Miller, 2014). Organizations should also focus on developing employees' deep-acting skills, or feeling rules, rather than surface-acting skills, or display rules, because deep acting appears to have lesser negative consequences on an employee's emotional health and job satisfaction (Bono & Vey, 2007). Managers would also benefit from emotional intelligence training to better support staff (Jordan, 2014).

Training and education on emotional labour

Most of the research on emotional labour in libraries emphasizes the need for further training and education of library staff. Peng (2015) recommended training workshops as a way for employees to explore emotional management and understand the stressors involved in surface acting. The negative effects of surface acting may not be completely eliminated through training, but they can be mitigated through acknowledgement and support for emotional labour, which may then help to increase job satisfaction and performance (Peng, 2015). Philipp and Schüpbach (2010) suggested that deep acting can reduce emotional exhaustion, in part because the recipients of deep acting (in the case of libraries, the customers) react more positively when they detect the authenticity of emotions that deep acting produces. Organizations could also adjust hiring practices to consider an "emotional demands-abilities fit" (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011, p. 383) when selecting staff. Prospective employees who display extroverted characteristics and have a natural propensity to deep acting may be more successful and less prone to burnout (Kim, 2008). Peng (2015) noted that managers must be cognizant of cultural-specific norms that may impact the approach to training and warned that such collective

training practices may encourage a mentality that values group needs over an individual.

Further, some research suggests that the study of emotional labour should be included in graduate library school curriculum in order to reveal the affective experiences of librarians (Julien & Genuis, 2009). Developing emotional intelligence, amongst other soft skill training, would help librarians in particular to reach their full potential to provide the highest quality of service (Matteson et al., 2016). A recent study affirms the importance of training in interpersonal and customer service skills, and it goes further to suggest that more advanced skill training is needed, given the community engagement and social work activities now present in public library service (Williams & Saunders, 2020). Perhaps also greatly aware of the increase in challenging customer service interactions, Smith et al. (2020) suggested that library schools provide mental health and self-care education for graduates, particularly those entering public library work.

Salyers et al. (2018) suggested various self-initiated measures to reduce emotional exhaustion, including "non-work leisure time activities" (p. 981) such as mindfulness exercises and the development of outside interests. Effects of activities such as the ones listed above can vary according to an individual's ability to self-regulate, or self-monitor, their publicly projected self; those who have a better ability to self-monitor their emotions and align those emotions with their outward self are better able to project an authentic and sincere persona (Bono & Vey, 2007).

Since Matteson and Miller (2012) published their suggested research agenda for emotional labour in library work, several studies have explored its effects on library staff and the workplace. However, limited advancement has been made on public libraries specifically, and there has been minimal acknowledgement of the emotional labour experiences of public library workers. This research project attempts to fill that gap. While previous studies have called on library organizations to properly address the deficiencies of emotional labour support, there is little evidence that substantial and meaningful changes are occurring.

Methodology

This qualitative research project utilized case study methodology to explore expressions of emotional labour in public libraries. Qualitative research examines the world of lived experience by looking at how "social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). According to Merriam (2009), generic qualitative research, also called basic or interpretive qualitative research, "attempts to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). Case study is an appropriate methodology to explore "a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection" (Creswell, 2009, p. 73). This study examines one bounded case (public libraries) and describes the experiences of library workers in public libraries in one Canadian province. It uses Stake's (1995) distinction of an intrinsic case, in which the researcher aims to develop a more substantial understanding of a particular case.

The researchers received research ethics approval before beginning this study. A qualitative survey, using SurveyMonkey, was distributed electronically to library workers in the province. The survey included a few demographic questions but focused on several open-ended questions to encourage longer-form, narrative responses. These open-ended questions were designed to help the researchers gain an understanding of participants' experiences with customer service, customer interactions, and emotional labour in public libraries. The full survey is included in this paper as Appendix 1.

A survey invitation and link were sent electronically to library workers using library listservs and various library associations in the province. To ensure that the study included a range of diverse experiences and perspectives, the researchers invited all types of library workers, including managers, administrators, librarians, library technicians, and pages, to participate. The sample size was determined by the number of people who chose to complete the survey.

Survey responses were collected electronically in fall 2019. 121 responses were received, with a 100% completion rate. Participants typically spent about 16 minutes completing the survey. The researchers analyzed the responses to each survey question thematically, looking for common themes and trends that emerged within each question and across questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles et al., 2014). The overarching goal for analysis was to purposively examine themes within the case (Yin, 2014).

Findings

This section includes findings for each survey question. The responses to each question are organized thematically and include representative quotations from participants to illustrate the themes.

Demographic questions

The majority of respondents, 86% or 104 people, reported working in medium or large public libraries that serve populations of 10,000 people or more, while 14% of respondents said they worked in a small or rural public library. Most participants (90%) identified as female. The respondents represented a variety of roles in public libraries, with positions ranging from library page to library manager or administrator. Of the 121 respondents, 16% (19 people) stated that they worked as a library page or clerk (a position that does not require specific library education or training); 32% (39 people) worked as a library technician or assistant (a role requiring a diploma); 18% (22 people) worked in librarian roles (roles requiring MLIS degrees); 24% (29 people) worked as a library manager or administrator; and 10% (12 people) had other roles not specifically captured in this list (including program coordinator, information specialist, library assistant, etc.).

Participants were asked about their hours of work. Of the 121 respondents, 61% (73 people) worked full-time (35+ hours/week); 32% (38 people) worked part-time (17-34 hours/week); and 7% (8 people) worked casual or temporary positions (1-16

hours/week or contract work). Study participants were asked to identify how long they had worked in public libraries over their lifetime: 9% (11 people) had worked less than 2 years in public libraries, 45% (54 people) had worked in public libraries for 2-9 years, and 46% (56 people) had worked in public libraries for 10 years or more. A final demographic question asked participants to identify how much time they spent interacting with customers: 12% (15 people) spent less than 10% of their day working with customers; 45% (54 people) spent between 10% and 50% of their day with customers; and 43% (52 people) spent more than 50% of their day working directly with customers.

What do you enjoy most about working with library customers?

The first open-ended question asked participants what they enjoy most about working with library customers. Responses indicated that interacting with the community and building relationships with customers were among their favourite parts of their jobs. For example, one respondent stated, "I love getting to know them so I can help provide the programming and resources that would be most beneficial to them. I love the relationships I build with my program participants. I love the community we're building together."

Another common theme from the responses to this question suggested that library workers enjoy facilitating access to information and reading materials and helping customers, while also solving problems with and for their customers. For example,

> I've always been fascinated with people and the stories they carry as they walk through their lives. I really enjoy interacting with children, teens, and adults from all walks of life. It offers me a great perspective on people from all walks of life and from around the world. Having positive interactions with people triggers positive emotions (joy, happiness, pride in my work) and it lifts my spirits.

The diversity of library work emerged as something that survey respondents enjoyed about their jobs. As one participant stated,

> I love the diversity I get by working with customers. In 5 minutes, I could go from doing academic research to finding housing resources for a homeless teen to teaching someone basic computer skills. I also love how I have built relationships with many customers.

Library workers reported enjoying various aspects of their jobs, including the diversity of work, the problem solving, and the relationships they build through their interactions with customers.

What do you find most challenging about working with customers?

The second open-ended survey question asked participants to describe what they found most challenging about working with customers. One common challenge was the diversity of customer experiences and needs. One participant stated,

being able to navigate the diverse needs of my customers. Some customers don't speak very much English, some customers are dealing with trauma, some customers are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, some customers' home lives are abusive, some customers are refugees, some customers are homeless, and there are so many other traumas that people are dealing with that I have to be able to navigate to provide for them.

The researchers also identified several themes related to demanding customers, lack of respect for library workers, and inappropriate behaviour in the library or towards library workers. One survey respondent stated that rudeness is challenging in the library setting: "the lack of everyday politeness, and then those extra special customers who are overtly rude, can ruin my shift in a matter of moments. I don't recover well from it and I can stay angry for a long time." Other respondents highlighted the harassment they face from some library customers. For example, "the major challenge I face is working with customers who behave inappropriately towards myself and other staff members—asking for phone numbers, inappropriate touching, or lewd comments."

A related theme from this question had to do with violence that library workers see and experience. For example, one respondent noted that

it can be difficult to handle aggressive or violent behaviour. That is extreme and we have policies in place and security to support us in these situations, but it isn't always communicated clearly which customers have previous violent experience. That can be stressful. I find microaggression on the whole very difficult to handle. If someone is being rude, sexist, misogynist, racist, etc., while not crossing the line into aggressive or violent, I have to take the time to stifle my emotional reaction (which can range from upset and hurt, to very angry) in order to communicate clearly and professionally that their behaviour will not be tolerated in the library.

Working with these challenging situations and customers has sometimes led to mental exhaustion from being on the front lines of customer service, which some participants identified as compassion fatigue. For example, one respondent stated,

I often have 30-40 conversations/interactions per hour. It is exhausting. We have people who are so traumatized and anxious around technology that they do not know how to behave decently around those that help them. It is exhausting to be in contact with so many on the edge of crisis, and yet so fulfilling to have the opportunity to help.

Another respondent emphasized that it was challenging "having to say yes to everything and everyone, regardless of how unreasonable the request is. Being expected to take on the problems of others and excuse abusive behaviour. Working hard and pleasing everyone with no gratitude."

Finally, respondents to this question reported that a perceived lack of support or willingness to make changes from library management or leadership is a significant challenge. For example, one respondent noted that

> what really erodes my confidence is the lack of acknowledgement by directors and the CEO on the perils of library work. The speed at which they address security issues is appallingly slow and disconnected. I want someone to have my back.

Another respondent described

> feeling as though those who run the organization do not have an understanding of the stresses of the day-to-day on the floor work. Lack of appropriate staffing numbers, lack of communication on violent/aggressive customers, and an atmosphere of "find a way to say yes" versus "keep yourself and the library safe."

Library workers faced challenges including the diversity of needs and requests that they encounter every day, the threat of violence or inappropriate behaviour, compassion fatigue, and a perceived lack of support on the part of library management. These challenges are illustrated in more detail in the responses to the next question.

Describe a time when you were dealing with a difficult customer interaction.

The next series of questions in the survey asked participants to describe and reflect on a memorable difficult customer interaction. The researchers identified several themes common to these experiences.

First, respondents described situations that involved verbal threats to library workers and their personal safety. For example, "a memorable [interaction] involved someone threatening me and calling me a cunt repeatedly because I asked him to leave the children's and family area due to his behaviour." Another theme related to physical threats to library workers and other customers. For example, one respondent stated,

> the worst interaction I've had was when a customer attempted to hit me after telling her that she would have to wait for a computer. She attempted to launch across the counter, and when she couldn't reach me, she punched the computer in front of me instead.

Another respondent described a situation when "one guy almost punched out a teen because he was convinced the teen was the one who interfered with him. I was able to diffuse the situation, but it made me shake for hours."

A final theme highlighted how gender played a role in several customer interactions that participants described in response to this question. One library worker described a situation where "essentially the customer wasn't listening to me because of my gender. I ended up getting a male coworker to take over. Their interaction went fine." Similar customer interactions described cases of sexual harassment. For example, one participant had a "patron that [was] tooooo friendly. He had cornered me in a washroom,

and I had to sidestep to get out." Another participant described a situation in which "I was complimented on my body and it made me uncomfortable. So, I politely said thank you and passed the patron on to someone else at the desk." Library workers also reported feeling unsafe as a result of their gender-based interactions with customers. For example,

> I was told over the phone that the patron was watching me, and that he would be outside the door when I left. He told me he would find me, and that I would be sorry. I felt afraid and vulnerable. I had to leave the building with friends for a long time after that.

Negative interactions as a result of library staff members' gender were commonly reported in response to this question about challenging customer encounters.

What were some of the emotions you experienced during and after the transaction described above?

After describing a particularly challenging customer interaction, survey respondents were asked to describe some of the emotions they experienced during and after the transaction. Participants described emotions ranging from fear, terror, anger, and stress to exasperation, disbelief, and shame. Their expressions reflected conflicting and confused emotions. For example, one respondent described being embarrassed during the interaction:

> I always feel embarrassed when I am sexually harassed. And the conversation about my racism was also embarrassing. Panic—I also often feel panic when sexual harassment is the issue. Should I say something? Should I let it go? What if this escalates? What if I say something and it escalates, and leadership asks why I made such a big deal of it and caused the incident.

Other respondents described feeling "helpless exhaustion, if that's a thing. Deflated and anxious at the same time" as well as being

> frustrated by the way I was being spoken to and by the hopelessness of the situation. I wasn't personally invested in whether or not she paid the charges but wasn't given a reason that would allow me to waive them.

Finally, another survey participant described their emotions during an incident "like emotional napalm. It comes out of nowhere and attempts to decimate you and your good mood."

In their responses to this question, library workers described their inner emotional response to difficult customer interactions; the next question asked participants to consider what might have been noticeable to the customer.

Thinking about the same interaction you described, what would the customer have noticed about you during the transaction?

When thinking about their outward-facing actions, words, or emotions, study participants noted that they often looked calmer than they felt, smiling and trying to de-escalate the situation and hide their real emotions. For example, "I don't think they noticed anything. I actually managed to remain very calm in this interaction." Another participant stated that

> I tried to remain calm. I didn't raise my voice or increase my talking speed. I calmly asked them to lower their voice and be respectful and tried to offer another avenue of communication/information in case they wanted to escalate.

Several participants described smiling as a way of masking their real emotions while also using tone of voice and body language to de-escalate the challenging situation. For example,

> he would have noticed that I was speaking gently and quietly to avoid making a scene and embarrassing him. I used phrasing from our mission and plan of service to support my decision. I was also empathetic without apologizing ... I am not certain if he could read my true emotions as I always do my best to not express frustration with difficult patrons.

Responses to this question emphasized the differences between how library workers feel and their outward facing actions during a challenging customer interaction.

What strategies do you use to deal with stress that is associated with customer interactions at work?

Library workers reported dealing with challenging customer situations and the various emotions they experience as a result of these situations. Many responses suggested that these interactions result in stress, and participants identified several strategies that help them deal with that stress.

Responses to this question emphasized the importance of supportive co-workers. For example, "I try to talk it through with colleagues, but often get in trouble from management for venting or displaying emotion." Participants also cited the support of family and friends as a way of dealing with the stress associated with customer interactions at work. While this support is important, many responses suggested that they protected family and friends from some of the details of these interactions. For example, "I talk it through, with limited details, with my partner. Especially when something is particularly stressful or emotional."

Some library staff members needed to find ways to remove themselves from front-line customer service work, particularly after an intense customer interaction. For example, "I try to shelve some books afterwards to reset my emotions."

Self-care was also a significant theme in the responses to this question. Self-care took many forms, including taking breaks throughout the day and spending time alone to recharge:

> I have a lot of alone time in my non-work life these days. Being around people, even in social environments, causes me a lot of stress and I acknowledge that and take steps to provide myself with the best environment I can outside of work.

Participants also highlighted the importance of healthy eating, exercise, meditation, breathing strategies, and therapy as part of their self-care routines. For example,

> I have a strict routine of eating properly and on time, exercising daily. I also do yoga in the winter, a massage course once a year. I have to keep my sleep rituals in order to get good sleep. In short, I do everything I can to manage my stress at work.

Another respondent noted that "having regular therapy helps me deal with work-related traumas that exacerbate the anxiety that I already deal with." Finally, some participants reduced their hours of work to allow them to properly manage their stress. For example, "dealing with the public has taken a toll on my health. I have only worked four days a week in this position and spend my off day doing outdoor activities."

Do you have to manage your true emotions at work?

Participants were asked whether they had to manage their true emotions at work. 94% of the participants indicated that they do, to varying degrees. Their comments suggested that having to manage their emotions has led to burn out. For example, "it is exhausting. We have to always be calm and professional, which is often okay in the moment, but afterwards, we don't have a way to let it out, so it festers." A desire to leave the library field was another common response to this question. For example:

> The constant emotional charade has gotten to the point where I sometimes consider quitting my job or switching to a different library sector. I am sometimes scared to go to work, or find myself counting down the hours—only one more hour to go, and it will all be fine as long as there is no incident.… When I first started, I absolutely loved my job, but now I feel like it's eating me alive from the inside. I am terrified that one day I am going to have a mental breakdown at work and yell at a customer or start crying.

Hiding their emotions also resulted in library workers feeling that their supervisors did not fully understand the demands of the job, which led to decreased motivation and feeling the need to restrain themselves from showing their emotions throughout the day. For example,

> the entire day is an act of restraint.… I wish there was a higher expectation of customers and that we could, as a society, abolish the notion that the customer is always right. I feel like bullies win, they get what they want, are rewarded with above and beyond service, while the polite people get less.

Another participant described working

> to help people who I find to be unpleasant, bigoted, sexist, homophobic, etc., but it's my job to treat them with the same respect as anyone else, even if they don't treat me that way. I can't appear frustrated with a customer. All the pressure is on me to be professional and de-escalate the situation and that means I can't be emotional.

Library workers reported varying experiences of managing their true emotions at work, but the common theme was that they felt they were expected to hide how they really feel in order to be effective in their roles.

What strategies does your organization provide to address emotional labour?

The final set of survey questions asked respondents to consider the ways in which their libraries support staff members in terms of emotional labour. When asked about strategies that libraries provided to address emotional labour, 74% of participants said they have been provided with training on how to deal with, or intervene in, potentially volatile situations; 27% of respondents said they received training on the facets of emotional labour; and 12% said their libraries had developed best practices for effective emotional labour. Participants mentioned workshops, debriefing after an incident, and wellness strategies as ways in which libraries support their staff members to address emotional labour. For example, "recently a trauma informed workshop was developed, which includes some strategies for dealing with emotional labour, but only managers and some other leadership staff have taken it." Many participants also indicated that while training was provided by their libraries (such as customer service and de-escalation training), emotional labour was not specifically part of staff training. One respondent noted that

> I have attended "how to deal with difficult people" workshops at conferences but have not had anything related to emotional labour at our library. We do share stories and solutions at our staff meetings sometimes, which does help when you realize you are not the only one.

Libraries seem to have varying levels of training and support in place to help workers deal with emotional labour in the library.

What could your workplace do to make it easier for you to manage situations that require emotional labour?

After reflecting on the strategies that libraries offer to deal with emotional labour, participants were asked what their workplaces could do to make it easier for staff to manage situations that require emotional labour. Training, support from management or library leadership, and understanding, openness, and acknowledgement of these situations were all key themes. For example, one respondent suggested

> more training about abusive customers and more serious repercussions for those customers (as the suspension and banning system is extremely flawed), more

resources for social workers at the library, collaboration with agencies who can also help, and physical/mental health challenges of staff need to be taken more seriously and more accommodations for those needing medical assistance during work hours.

Several responses to this question mentioned finding ways to be more open about emotional labour and acknowledge the toll it takes on library workers. For example, one respondent asked administrators to

> listen to us, believe us, and allow for us to have breathing room. They could also create policies, and follow through with them, toward not tolerating demanding and abusive behaviour. We shouldn't have to wait until it escalates to refuse service.

Someone else wanted libraries to "recognize stress as a workplace hazard, write policies that make the roles for managers clear in situations where conflict with patrons arise, and create an environment where it is okay to express stress and other negative emotions." Some participants suggested that more opportunities for flexible scheduling and breaks would be a way for libraries to better support their staff members. Other common responses included opportunities to debrief after challenging interactions, setting clear expectations for customer behaviour, and acknowledging that emotional labour is a significant factor in library work.

Discussion

This study found ample evidence that public library workers experience emotional labour in their work. Participants described meaningful experiences connecting with customers and an authentic desire to make a difference in the lives of their customers. However, they also reported major challenges in their customer service work, and as Jordan (2014) indicated, much of it centers around challenging patron needs and contemporary societal issues. As Smith et al. (2020) found, a big source of stress for library staff is "outsider-initiated harassment" (p. 425). Participants in this study reported feeling inadequate in dealing with situations described as verbal and physical abuse. They had a strong desire to assist customers, but the support they needed to provide excellent customer service and maintain personal well-being was often inadequate.

High instance of surface acting

The findings of this study indicate a high instance of surface acting and "behavior modulation" (Grandey & Sayre, 2019), in which external behaviour is modified but does not match internal emotions. In almost all reported cases, what participants felt during a difficult transaction was in complete opposition to what they outwardly projected. They reported feeling afraid, angry, and frustrated on the inside but calm and professional on the outside. As one participant stated, "the entire day is an act of restraint." This corroborates previous research that has shown the high cost of surface acting, including physical health issues, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and the potential to quit a job (Chau et al., 2009; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Kim, 2008; Matteson,

2017). Participants in this study reported similar negative effects, such as exhaustion, decreased motivation, and burnout. Surface acting also affects many individuals' personal lives. Some participants reported having difficulty decompressing and diminished enjoyment of life outside of work. More concerning is the number of participants who questioned whether they had the stamina or desire to continue working in the field. One participant initially enjoyed their job but stated that it was now "eating [them] alive from the inside." The effects of surface acting are emotionally draining and override the enjoyment that participants experienced when connecting with their customers.

Deep acting and job satisfaction

The survey responses included authentic displays of empathy, which indicate the presence of deep acting. Participants described their interactions as rewarding, positive, and emotionally fulfilling. They used words such as "help," "connecting," "community," and "relationships" to describe what they most enjoyed about working with customers. This genuine show of empathy was often accepted positively by the customer. This sense of connection makes deep acting an accessible and effective way for library staff to manage emotional labour, and it can lead to high levels of job satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2013). The genuine joy of interacting with the community, facilitating access to resources, building relationships, and helping to solve problems can provide an easier pathway to deep acting and reduce the emotional dissonance staff experience in their work (Philipp & Schüpbach, 2010).

Library work as gendered and affective labour

Most participants in this study (90%) identified as female, and many of their responses fit into the gendered perception of service: that others' emotional status is more important than one's own well-being (Wharton, 2009). Participants described a lack of support in their organizations for the emotional demands of their job; these responses fit the notion that intellectual labour, or mind work, is valued more than the affective or emotional aspects of work (Sloniowski, 2016). Feminist theorists have long explored the notion of the "gendered immaterialization of labour" (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 646), but little headway has been made to circumvent the devaluing of affective labour in library work. Sloniowski (2016) strongly urged the library research sector to recognize and speak about affective labour both inside and outside of library literature and to develop professional metrics that recognize and reward the emotional work of library staff.

The service philosophy that the "customer is always right" affects many interactions in libraries, and study participants reported a lack of power in challenging situations. One participant described their exhaustion from "having to say yes to everything and everyone"; they seemed to feel a responsibility to consistently please the customer. This aligns with affective, gendered labour, in which the desire is to create "in others, feelings of well-being or affirmation" (Wharton, 2009, p. 149). Survey responses included gender-specific references to customer interactions, perhaps exacerbated by the skewed balance of power toward the customer (Wharton, 2009). Further, several participants described sexual harassment in the workplace, such as "asking for phone

numbers, inappropriate touching, or lewd comments" and being "complimented on my body." One participant's comment suggested that they were aware of their position of power and felt guilty when they had to confront harassing behaviour from someone more disadvantaged. Participants conflated a sense of power with actions of oppression: when one participant was accused of being racist, she reported that "it also felt a bit ridiculous to be a white, upper middle-class woman asking a likely underhoused Indigenous man to please not oppress me with his harassment." Such conflict creates an added layer of complexity and emotional distress to some library workers' experiences.

The discourse in professional guidelines encourages tipping the balance of power towards the customer. The RUSA (2013) *Guidelines* provide library workers with direction on how to behave in order to provide excellent customer service (Emmelhainz et al., 2017), but they do not acknowledge how to reconcile inner emotions with outward countenance. The prescriptive nature of the *Guidelines* seems to discourage any personal or genuine responses to patron interactions. Participants in this study appeared to be well-trained and obediently followed guidelines by showing no outward signs of frustration or emotion; they reported that to the customer, they were calm, had non-threatening body language, and were smiling, and as one participant stated, they "used phrasing from [the] mission and plan of service to support [the] decision." Professional norms that develop from stated and well-documented guidelines often prioritize emotional control, which may actually inhibit one's ability to fully express their emotions at work (Funk et al., 2017). There are no official guidelines in library and information sciences that provide support for dealing with difficult customer behaviour or that provide self-regulation strategies. The emphasis in existing guidelines is on the need to please the user and provide consistently pleasant service, as opposed to considering the more complex psychological or emotional support that a customer may need. Further, the RUSA *Guidelines* gloss over customer interactions as routine informational requests and ignore the societal challenges that today's public library staff face on a regular basis.

Strategies for change

Other professions, such as nursing, have made more progress in acknowledging emotional labour and offer employee assistance programs, mindfulness training, and perhaps most importantly, administrative support (Cricco-Lizza, 2014; Funk et al., 2017; Hülsheger et al., 2013). When asked what their workplace could do, participants in this study mentioned all of these options. Their responses suggested that managerial support in the form of policies, acknowledgements of the challenges of working in customer service, specific emotional labour training (not just "how to deal with a difficult customer"), and time and space to debrief about experiences would ease the pressures associated with performing emotional labour. Matteson and Miller's (2014) hierarchy of needs model might be a good place to start in designing levels of support within a library organization.

Surface- and deep-acting training could help arm employees with strategies to manage emotionally charged situations (Peng, 2015). Research suggests that such training can

help to reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout (Ishii & Markman, 2016; Philipp & Schüpbach, 2010; Rutner et al., 2011). Jordan (2014) suggested that organizations emphasize training in emotional intelligence skills; Julien and Genuis (2009) recommended that library school curriculum include an awareness of the affective nature of library work. Although no study has specifically mentioned training of clerks, technicians, or others not in a professional librarian capacity, organizations should recognize and train all employees who fill a customer service role. Greater focus on people management skills, including emotional labour, in the education and training of library workers would not only increase awareness of one's own emotional intelligence but also provide the opportunity to build strategies for self-reflection (Matteson et al., 2016). Further to this, deep-acting training could encourage a "cognitive reappraisal" (Rutner et al., 2011, p. 106), so that outward (normative) emotions more closely align with felt emotions. Occupational training has largely focused on surface acting, or behavioural norms and expectations of the job (Rutner et al., 2011). Mindfulness training could also be a part of library studies (Smith et al., 2020), but providing continuing support for self-care activities is the responsibility of the workplace. Although a significant number of participants indicated that they used self-care strategies to cope, the authors of this study caution against reliance on these measures alone to counteract negative emotions. While self-care techniques are important and may help to address emotional exhaustion (Salyers et al., 2018), they will be most effective when practiced in conjunction with support from the organization.

Organizations could also consider emphasizing emotional intelligence in their hiring practices. An "emotional demands-abilities fit" (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011, p. 383) would help to ensure that hired staff are capable of emotional labour. Kim (2008) suggested that extroverted individuals are more successful at deep acting, and although it may be impractical or difficult to assess introvert or extrovert tendencies upon hiring, training that focuses on deep-acting techniques may help to alleviate emotional exhaustion and burnout. There is great opportunity for growth in support, at both the educational and the organizational level, that will help to reveal the effects of emotional labour on library workers.

Conclusions & Further Research

This study included library workers in a variety of roles in various sizes of libraries, from small and rural to large and urban. These participants described experiencing meaningful interactions in their customer service roles, including positive experiences that triggered positive emotions, leading to instances of emotional harmony (Hochschild, 1983). However, they also experienced challenging situations in which their outward countenance conflicted with their inner emotions. The inability to reconcile two opposing emotions and a perceived lack of support affected their personal well-being and enjoyment of customer service work. Participants reported exhaustion and burnout as outcomes of emotional labour.

Libraries have followed similar patterns to other historically gendered careers, such as nursing, by failing to acknowledge the value of emotional work. The profession could acknowledge the emotional labour aspects of library work in professional guidelines and

training and provide more extensive formalized support for all staff with customer service duties. It is time to move beyond basic soft skill training and begin to recognize the toll that complex social interactions take on public library front-line service workers. By offering ongoing training and support for emotional labour and focusing on building awareness of emotional intelligence and educating staff on deep-acting strategies, library organizations can help to reduce exhaustion and burnout in individuals who perform customer service work. These practices will not preclude workers from experiencing troubling situations like those reported in this study. However, if emotional labour were a required part of library education and a key area of focus in workplace training, it could help alleviate some of the anxieties that difficult customer interactions cause. At the same time, equipping staff with stronger emotional labour strategies could help to build resilience and increase job satisfaction. Furthermore, post-secondary library training programs and workplace training in libraries could draw on the intersectionality of social work theory and practice as well as theory from other professions that deal with emotional labour, such as nursing and teaching, to strengthen training for library workers. The work being done in other professions could also help inform support for public library workers.

Future studies involving in-depth interviews or focus groups to further explore the impact of emotional labour on public library workers would provide an even greater understanding of this topic. Additionally, research that expands to other provinces or countries would be useful to identify potential regional differences in the experiences of public library workers and trends throughout public libraries. In further studies, expanded demographic questions that look more specifically at the implications of race and gender in the emotional labour of public library work would be useful contributions to the field. This initial study provides insight and gives voice to public library workers in one Canadian province. The researchers hope that this is the beginning of a more significant investigation of this issue in libraries, both from a research perspective and from a workplace culture and training perspective.

On a broad level, professional norms and guidelines should be developed to provide support for dealing with difficult customer behaviour or to provide strategies for effective self-regulation. An increase in organizational-level training and support for emotional labour and inclusion of this topic in post-secondary library training programs will help to raise awareness and understanding of emotional labour in library work. The emotional aspects of public library work must be acknowledged. Full, unapologetic support for all staff is necessary in order for change to occur.

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Appendix 1

Survey questions

1. What size of public library are you employed in?

- Large, urban (population over 500,000)
- Medium, suburban (population between 10,000-500,000)
- Small, urban (population under 10,000)
- Rural
- Other (please specify)

2. To what gender identity do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify)

3. What is your current job position?

- Library page/Library clerk (position that does not require specific library education or training)
- Library technician (position that requires a Library Technician diploma or additional post-secondary education)
- Librarian (position that requires an MLIS)
- Library Manager/Library Administrator
- Other (please specify)

4. Are you employed:
- Full-time (35 or more hours a week)
- Part-time (between 17-34 hours a week)
- Casual (between 1-16 hours a week)
- Other (please specify. For example, contract work that does not hold consistent hours throughout the year)

5. How long have you worked in public libraries in your lifetime? (part-time and full-time, in total)
- Under 2 years
- 2-9 years
- 10 or more years

6. On average, how much time do you spend with customers daily?
- Less than 10% of the day
- Between 10-50% of the day
- More than 50% of the day

Comments:

7. What do you enjoy most about working with customers?

8. What do you find the most challenging about working with customers?

9. Think of a time when you were dealing with a difficult customer interaction. Describe what happened.

10. Thinking about the same interaction you described above, what were some of the emotions you experienced during and after the transaction?

11. Thinking about the same interaction you described above, tell us what the customer would have noticed about you during the transaction (e.g. your outward facing actions/words/emotions)?

12. What strategies do you use to deal with stress that is associated with customer interactions at work? (e.g. take frequent breaks, talk it through with coworkers, friends, or family, deep breathing, etc.)

13. Do you have to manage your true emotions at work? If so, how does that affect how you feel, overall, about your job? Please explain.

14. What strategies does your library organization provide to address emotional labour? (check all that apply)

☐ Training on how to deal with, or intervene in, potentially volatile situations

☐ Training on the facets of emotional labour; e.g. interpersonal communication skills, emotional intelligence, how to recognize burnout, etc.

☐ Internal social support networks; e.g. opportunities for staff to share stories and provide support with one another; opportunities for staff to restore internal emotional balance

☐ Close monitoring of emotional demands placed on library staff; emotional labour recognized as part of the performance appraisal process; health and wellness programming for employees

☐ Best practices developed (and written down) for effective emotional labour.

Comment further, or please specify if there are supports provided that do not fall into these categories OR if no supports are provided.

15. What could your workplace do to make it easier for you to manage situations that require emotional labour?

16. Are you interested in participating in a short, follow-up interview about your experiences and emotional labour? If so, please share your full name, email address, and phone number and the researchers will contact you. Your identity throughout the research is kept strictly confidential and anonymity is guaranteed.

17. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?