

The Culture of Care in Librarianship

Sajni Lacey (she/her), University of British Columbia Okanagan

Donna Langille (she/her), University of British Columbia Okanagan

We would like to acknowledge that we live and work as uninvited settlers on the unceded territory of the Sylix Peoples.

This work is licensed under a CC-BY 4.0 license.

Introduction

Librarianship continues to be a highly feminized field where workers, especially marginalized folx, are often expected to provide an unhealthy and unsafe amount of emotional labour for their patrons and colleagues. Extended emotional labour can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout and is deeply connected to the vocational awe associated with librarianship and library work (Lowe & Reno, 2018; Ettarh, 2018).

Libraries, Empathy, and COVID-19

Despite these risks, the COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of empathy, a kind of emotional labour, in building relationships with patrons and providing support that meets their needs (Bruce, 2020).

As we move our traditionally physical services to online, how can we extend empathy and consider the individual experiences of patrons' within the context of COVID-19?

Our Patrons

Are they an essential worker or live with one? Are they taking care of or have a sick family member or friend that is immediately affected by COVID? Do they have children? Do they have access to reliable internet and technology? Is someone else in their

household also working remotely? Have they lost their job or in a precarious position because of COVID-19?

The diverse platforms that we interact on (in person, blended, online etc.), especially in the context of COVID 19 informs, enables, and shifts how empathy is performed (Miller & Wallis, 2011).

Sharing “prevailing human occurrences,” such as the collective and shared experiences related to COVID-19, allows for relational experience between us, our patrons, and colleagues (Angell, 2011, p. 21).

Care is Political

How do we ensure that an ethic of care is not being used to enable and maintain systems that are inherently oppressive (McGregor, 2020)?

Care is enacted by individuals, not institutions (Clarke Gray, 2020). Care has been used to enact violence in the name of colonialism and white supremacy (McGregor, 2020).

Remembering that who is asked to provide that empathy and care and who we extend empathy and care to is inherently political (McGregor, 2020).

Resisting Burnout

How can we extend empathy towards not only our patrons but also our colleagues and ourselves in ways that will resist burnout?

(Tan, Muskat, & Johns, 2019; Badalamenti & Hardy, 2019; Zenasni, Boujut, Woerner, & Sultan, 2012)

- Removing ourselves from the narrative of vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) and recognizing our own needs for boundaries is part of the empathy we can extend to ourselves (Angell, 2011).
- Remembering that who is asked to provide that empathy and care and who we extend empathy and care to is inherently political (McGregor, 2020).

How can we extend empathy towards not only our patrons but also our colleagues and ourselves in ways that will resist burnout?

(Tan, Muskat, & Johns, 2019; Badalamenti & Hardy, 2019; Zenasni, Boujut, Woerner, & Sultan, 2012)

Individualized attention where possible, and within reason, to both our colleagues and patrons

Recognizing the contributions of yourself and others.

Setting expectations within interactions.

Leaving space to hear individual context

Setting boundaries in what we can and cannot provide within the context of our roles.

Self-reflection about individual emotions, frustrations, and perspectives that reflect and are parallel to that of our colleagues and patrons.

Removing ourselves from the narrative of vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) and recognizing our own needs for boundaries is part of the empathy we can extend to ourselves (Angell, 2011).

References

Angell, K. (2011). Application of Edith Stein's empathy theory to library science. *Library and Information Research* 35(110),

<https://lirjournal.org.uk/index.php/lir/article/download/253/513>

Badalamenti, J., & Hardy, E. (2019, February 19). Supporting autonomy while setting clear boundaries. *Public Libraries Online*.

<http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2019/02/supporting-autonomy-while-setting-clear-boundaries/>

Bruce, S. (2020). Teaching with care: A relational approach to individual research consultations. In *the Library with the Lead Pipe*.

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/teaching-with-care/>

Clarke Gray, B. (2020). I can't go on, I'll go on (with apologies to Samuel Beckett). From Practitioner to Pedagogue.

<https://blog.communityofpraxis.ca/2020/04/18/i-cant-go-on-ill-go-on-with-apologies-to-samuel-beckett/>

Ettarh, F. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. the Library with the Lead Pipe.

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>

Lowe, M., & Reno, L. M. (2018). Examining the Emotional Dimensions of Academic Librarianship: Emerging Research and Opportunities. IGI Global.

<http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-3761-8>

McGregor, H. (2020, April 16). What are we talking about when we talk about 'care'? Hook & Eye.

<https://hookandeye.ca/2020/04/16/guest-post-what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-care/>

Miller, F., & Wallis, J. (2011). Social interaction and the role of empathy in information and knowledge management: A literature review. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, vol. 52, no.1, pp. 122-132. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41308887>

Tan, A. H. T., Muskat, B., & Johns, R. (2019). The role of empathy in the service experience. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 29(2), 142-164.

[doi:10.1108/jstp-10-2018-0221](https://doi.org/10.1108/jstp-10-2018-0221)

Zenasni, F., Boujut, E., Woerner, A., & Sultan, S. (2012). Burnout and empathy in primary care: Three hypotheses. *British Journal of General Practice*, 62(600), 346-347.

[doi:10.3399/bjgp12X652193xt](https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp12X652193xt)