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Emotional Labor, Stressors, and Librarians Who Work with the Public

Abstract

Service jobs require regular interaction with customers and have certain expectations of specific emotions that should be shown during transactions. This use of expected emotional displays during service transactions is called emotional labor and it is an important part of service work, but there are significant consequences for regular use. This paper reviews the literature on emotional labor, and the consequences of the repeated use of emotional labor within the service workforce. It also reviews the literature on stressors reported by librarians and job-related stress. Relationships can be seen between emotional labor, the work of librarian professionals, and stressors in the library work field. By understanding this relationship librarians can better balance their stress and avoid burnout.

Keywords

Public libraries, user-related stress, stressors, public service librarians, stress, emotional labor, surface acting, deep acting, social sharing, venting

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About Author

Kelsey Simon has over five years of experience working in public libraries in a customer service role. Her love of service is what brought her to libraries to begin with, and she continues to provide the best library services she can at her current position at Georgia State University.

Librarians often feel stress associated with their jobs, which can lead to job burnout and poor physical well-being. Several factors come into play when taking a deeper look at librarians and stress. This is especially true for librarians who work with the public, as patrons have expectations about how they should be treated and librarians are often required to display certain emotions during transactions. This use of emotional labor plays an important role in the profession of the librarian.

This paper will review the literature on emotional labor and how emotional labor impacts service workers, before taking a close look at the stress and stressors public service librarians face. By reviewing the literature, a relationship can be seen between emotional labor and job-related stress for librarians. Understanding this relationship is key to decreasing the negative emotions, health risks, and dissatisfaction that librarians who work with the public routinely report experiencing within their jobs.

Emotional Labor

What is Emotional Labor?

In most service industries, part of the job is interacting with potential customers, clients, patients, or patrons. When interacting with the public, certain socially desired emotions are expected to be expressed, such as smiling and being cheerful, or remaining calm in stressful situations. Different jobs require different emotions and expressing these expected emotions during service transactions is called emotional labor. Hochschild (1983) defines two types of emotional labor: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves expressing inauthentic emotions, either through hiding felt emotions such as anger or fear when interacting with an irate patron, or through faking emotions, such as expressing happiness when one is feeling sad (Mroz & Kaleta, 2016). Surface acting can also occur beyond service transactions, such as with coworkers, and oftentimes, with supervisors.

Deep acting, on the other hand, does not deal with faking emotional displays but instead involves altering one's current emotional state. Deep acting is about transforming emotions, or one's perspective, so that the emotions one needs to express match the emotions one feels (Hulsheger & Schewe, 2011). For example, if a patron is upset about paying for library books lost in a house fire, a library employee would likely connect with their situation and be able to express the expected emotions out of sympathy.

Emotional labor is a part of service industry work, especially in western culture, and is doubtful to ever change. Users, whether customers, patrons, or clients, have come to expect certain emotional displays as part of their interactions with shopping, service, or other customer exchanges. The effect of constantly putting on these emotional displays is seldom considered, which contributes to the cycle of burnout and stress common in service-oriented professions.

The Impact of Emotional Labor

Hochschild (1983) speculated that emotional labor, no matter the type of acting being used, or the purpose of such acting, would have a negative impact on the one conducting the labor. Many researchers took this claim and dove deeper into Hochschild's ideas, studying the service industry and when certain types of emotional labor are being used, and the consequences of such use.

Zhang, Zhang, Lei, Yue and Zhu (2016) conducted research on sales clerks over a week, in which they were asked to fill out surveys. These surveys focused on the use of emotional labor in their work, the sleep they got between each day, and the fatigue they felt day to day. After gathering data from the survey responses, the authors found that the repeated daily use of surface acting was connected to fatigue, and not in a positive way. The findings showed that surface acting is directly connected to workers feeling more fatigued. While a solid night of rest did help relieve some of this fatigue, it was still felt the following day, especially after long periods of surface acting use.

Judge, Woolf, and Hurst's (2009) research took a closer look at personality types to see if the negative impact of using emotional labor had more to do with personality than the use of emotional labor itself. They compared extroverts to introverts, having them report on their uses of emotional labor and the impact they felt from such use. Extroverts reported feeling they used surface acting less, with deep acting coming to them more easily. The authors speculated that extroverts see themselves as more outgoing, friendly, and upbeat, thus they felt less of a need to fake these emotions regularly with customers. The research also showed that emotional labor was more difficult for introverts, who reported using surface acting more often. However, both extroverts and introverts felt emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction after the use of surface acting, even if extroverts felt the negative impact less than introverts.

In another study, Grandey, Foo, Groth and Goodwin (2012) investigated the customer interactions themselves, assuming that ruder interactions would be the real cause of service workers' distress. They studied situations that required excessive use of surface acting, and found that while these situations did cause emotional exhaustion, any interaction requiring surface acting caused emotional exhaustion. For example, this included transactions that required considerable patience, or ones that were boring to the librarian, not just the ones where the customer was rude.

Overall, the research and literature points to surface acting having a negative impact on those using it regularly. Hulsheger and Schewe (2011) note that surface acting not only harms emotional well-being but also hurts job performance. Morris and Feldman (1996) note that the use of emotional labor results in "lower job satisfaction, lower self-esteem, poorer health, and more depressive symptoms" (p. 1001). Ashford and Humphrey (1993) write that service workers are regularly exhausted by providing care and support for those in need. It becomes clear from the literature on surface acting that it is indeed the use of surface acting itself and not other internal or external factors that causes a negative effect on service workers. This includes fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and lower job satisfaction.

Deep acting was discussed less within the literature reviewed. Judge, Woolf, and Hurst (2009) noted that workers using deep acting felt fewer negative repercussions because they felt the emotions appropriate to the situation, thus not needing to fake them. They even reported the use of deep acting gave them a sense of accomplishment, as they felt authentic during their interactions. Similarly, Hulsheger and Schewe's (2011) article noted that deep acting "truly alters the inner emotional state and turns negative emotion into a positive one" (p. 366). During a service interaction, a worker will actually feel the positive emotions, which can lead to positive aftereffects. Deep acting still requires a certain amount of energy, as Matteson and Miller (2013) found that deep acting caused a sense of detachment and dissatisfaction, but on a much smaller scale than with surface acting. From the literature, it can be understood that the use of deep acting is not overly positive, but it does not have the lasting distressful impact that surface acting does.

Stress and Public Service Librarians

Within libraries, a great deal of research has been focused on the stress of being a librarian, specifically the stress associated with librarians that interface regularly with the public. Stress is defined by Petek (2018) as the way a human body reacts to its environment, or its perceived response to the environment's demands. Topper (2007) identifies that librarian stress is partially caused by the discrepancy between the public's perception of what a librarian does and a librarians actual work. The general public sees a librarian's job as being unstressful, and the library environment as one that cannot create stress. On the contrary, stress is a real concern in any position, and librarians are no different. Farler and Broady-Preston (2012) note that stress is not entirely negative. There is also a positive type of stress that can help workers feel more motivated and thus give one more energy to accomplish tasks. Stress is a balance, and the complete lack of stress can result in poor job performance.

However, too much stress can have a huge impact on an employee. Topper (2007), Farler and Broady-Preston (2012), and Petek (2018) all note that too much stress can cause health problems, lower productivity, anxiety, irritability, poor work performance, cynicism toward the organization, and negative behavior toward others. Stressors are defined by Petek (2018) as any external stimulus that can cause stress. Stressors are divided into two groups, physical and emotional. Experiencing too much stress, or too many stressors, can lead to burnout.

Library Stressors

Library-related stressors come from a range of work-related issues. Topper (2007) listed a variety of possible stress sources in the library setting including short staffing, work overload, inadequate time with patrons, not enough work space, poor management, and poor interpersonal relationships. Jordan (2014) surveyed public librarians to find the most common workplace stressors. Results showed budget, co-workers, workload, management, deadlines, facilities, technology, and lack of time. Larrivee (2014) looked at the variety of stressors specifically placed on new librarians that more experienced librarians might not experience. These include relocating for a job, homesickness, and learning one's new role.

Ettarh (2018) noted two major issues that could be causing librarians to feel stress in their workplace: under-compensation and job creep. Under-compensation is when a library does not have the funding to properly pay their employees for their work. Job creep is defined as when the work an employee volunteers to do as a temporary responsibility becomes gradually viewed as part of their permanent job role. This can lead to more and more responsibilities over time, and less time to accomplish them. Ettarh was not the only one to note this issue of job role concerns and the stress that can come with them. Linden, Salo, and Jansson (2018) in their research with fifty-three Swedish public librarians noted that one of the highest reported stressors was workload overload. Twelve librarians reported feeling they were assigned more tasks without others being cancelled, while another two noted their tasks and priorities weren't clear. Jordan's (2014) results from a survey of 95 librarians showed that 63 respondents listed interruptions to work in their top ten biggest stressors, while another 55 listed deadlines, and another 50 listed excessive workload, with 47 listing lack of time to finish work. Petek's (2018) research also documented all twenty of her interviewees experiencing role ambiguity and role overload related stress. Workload related stress is a very real stressor librarians experience regularly.

Farler and Broady-Preston (2012) had many librarians leave comments on their survey indicating stress related to users, including having to control noise disturbances and students being too loud and behaving inappropriately in a library space. The librarians in Petek's (2018) research indicated similar stressors in both academic and public library settings. All interviewees in her research indicated that users were the number one stressor in their library settings. This stress came from poorly defined needs, inappropriate behavior in the library setting, or irate users. Jordan's (2014) respondents also mentioned that abusive or rude patrons were a big cause of stress. They also included unattended children who were misbehaving, with users who went beyond simple rudeness identified as causing the most stress because of the threat to staff, emotionally and physically.

Management, the culture of the workplace, and drama between coworkers were also stressors identified by Petek (2018), Farler & Broady-Preston, and Jordan's (2014) research. Poor support from management was also listed as a stressor, but not in all libraries. Overall, librarians in each research case reported similar sources of stress that included user interactions, role ambiguity, work overload, and management and co-worker related issues. Some of the responders discussed various coping mechanisms, as when looking at causes of stress, it is worth spending a moment on how librarians deal with their workplace related stress.

Coping Mechanisms

Topper (2007) researched stress in the library workplace and came to some conclusions based upon her findings. She advises some coping mechanisms and ways to balance stress in the workplace: finding more information about a situation, expressing feelings about the situation to someone not involved in it, physical exercise, and taking a break or lunch. Larrivee (2014) noted that new librarians can help balance the stress of their job by finding encouragement and support from their peers. Team building activities and workshops on stress can

also be profitable. Salyers, Watkins, Painter, & More's (2019) research indicated that librarians favored two types of coping mechanisms. First are those that seek to master something outside work, defined as, "I do things that challenge me," and second, those that seek relaxation, "I do relaxing things". Librarians who challenged themselves showed a correlation between lower emotional exhaustion and less cynicism, where those that relaxed showed less emotional exhaustion, but not less cynicism. Of Petek's (2018) 20 respondents, 10 noted that taking breaks was their go-to way for dealing with stress. Seven reported asking for help or more information on a situation, and six reported talking to colleagues or friends and family worked for them. Other things respondents listed as coping mechanisms were: taking walks, reading, listening to music, and working in the garden.

Connecting Librarian Stress with Emotional Labor

Looking at the research between librarians and stress draws special attention to three big issues: the stress created from user interactions, the stress from coworker interactions, and the stress from management. These three factors all share one thing in common: the use of emotional labor, and more specifically, the repeated use of surface acting. Matteson and Miller (2013) seem to capture the idea that organizational expectations in libraries is for librarians to exude positive attitudes "in the face of dealing with difficult patrons, insufficient staffing, decreased monetary resources, performing repetitive tasks, and staying abreast of an ever-changing technology landscape" (p. 60). Matteson, Chittock, and Mease (2015) noted that even outside organizational standards, the profession itself has set behavioral standards that librarians are supposed to follow. These include expressing, "positive emotions by showing engagement with customers, greeting people with smiles and eye contact, and communication in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner" (p. 85). These standards mean librarianship at its core is a profession deeply connected to emotional labor.

Matteson and Miller's (2013) work shows that emotional labor is present in library work. They conducted a survey where they asked librarians about the rules regarding displaying emotions and if they felt such rules existed. Librarians reported feeling that they were expected to express positive emotions and suppress negative ones. Shuler and Morgan (2013) raised the discussion that librarians even use emotional labor in ways other than the obvious faking of positive emotions when feeling negative ones. They discussed how librarians also must hide their boredom. Librarians often help people with mundane tasks, such as how to print a document, and while the task might be the hundredth time doing it for a librarian, it is the first occurrence for a patron. This means they are often forced to hide their boredom toward the task at hand and pretend to be fully engaged. This is another form of surface acting.

In another study, Matteson, Chittock, and Mease (2015) conducted research that took a closer look at the relationship between librarians and emotional labor. They asked librarians to submit diary entries at the end of each work day over the course of five days. Librarians were able to write out situations they faced, the emotional labor they felt they used, and the way they felt after these interactions. Of the reports, the authors noted a use of surface acting in

twenty-seven of the reported twenty-nine events, or 93% of the time. In the same research, the most reported instance of emotional labor was during negative customer interactions. The second highest reported was through interactions with colleagues, usually with instances of a colleague not doing the work required of them, or a colleague behaving poorly. This research also looked at the outcomes associated with the use of emotional labor, and negative effects were reported, from cynicism and stress, to emotional exhaustion.

Shuler and Morgan (2013) documented that the most reported instance of emotional labor use came from patron interactions. Their research showed that working with patrons upset for not getting the answers they needed or finding what they were seeking, can be a truly awful form of emotional labor for a librarian, because librarians care about their work and their goal of sharing knowledge. A patron leaving with their needs not met can feel like a failure to a librarian. Overall, it is apparent that emotional labor is present in library work, and one of, if not the top instance of emotional labor usage is during patron interactions.

How to Cope: Social Sharing

When looking at emotional labor, and the general negative effects of the regular use of surface acting, one also has to look at what McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, and Chiu (2013) called *social sharing*. In this context, social sharing is described as talking with peers about customer interactions, more often the frustrating or negative ones. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) raised the discussion that social sharing is already something service heavy organizations are aware of. Places like banks and retail stores are designed to have a “frontstage” and a “backstage”. In the “frontstage” area, workers must act and be prepared to fulfill the organizational culture with regards to service transactions and expected emotional displays, which often means the heavy use of emotional labor. The “backstage” area is where workers can go afterwards to drop this facade, and socially share, or “vent” about poor customer interactions.

McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, and Chiu (2013) conducted research into the impact social sharing has after negative customer interactions. They had participants separated into two groups: those that answered phone calls and offered troubleshooting help with software, and those that made the phone calls and often escalated the interactions negatively. The customer service workers were unaware that the callers were fake. Afterwards, the workers were brought together and allowed to share, or vent their frustrations about the calls they received. What McCance, et al. (2013) found was that social sharing gave those using emotional labor in their research a way to feel relieved after distressing interactions. They suggested that a socially accepting space must first be created so that sharing can occur without fear. A workplace where one might be judged for social sharing would not help with the stress caused from emotional labor but could even increase it. However, should a socially acceptable place and culture be created, their research showed that workers felt better after venting about the interactions they had and went into their next session of emotional labor use harboring fewer negative emotions.

The importance of social sharing is important to consider within libraries and library design. Just as with retail stores, libraries should have a closed off “backstage” area where librarians can share with coworkers about negative patron interactions. Managers should also strive to create an open and understanding environment that allows healthy social sharing. Implementing both of these things will decrease the negative impact of the use of surface acting within libraries.

Conclusion

What This Means for Librarians

Emotional labor is indeed present in library work. Specifically, it is most prominent in public service work where librarians interact regularly with patrons and are put in positions where they must either fake positive emotions, hide boredom, or sometimes suppress anger they feel for a patron’s seemingly hopeless situations. This is compounded by the professional standards librarians are held to both within their organizations as the result of stated display rules for emotional output, and also from within the profession itself. For example, Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) Behavioral Performance Guidelines for Reference and Information Providers guidelines dictate using friendly greetings and inviting conversation, and states that librarians should communicate in a “receptive, cordial, and supportive manner”. Librarians struggle with both high internal and external standards that dictate they must express positive emotional cues outwardly, no matter how they are feeling inwardly, or how a patron is treating them. It doesn’t help that, as Shuler and Morgan (2013) note, librarians can even struggle with feeling failure when they aren’t able to help patrons as they would like.

Emotional labor is seldom discussed within library work, but is obviously a core component of the profession. The research done on the stressors librarians feel reports users and colleagues as common cases of stress. This is because of the required use of emotional labor and surface acting during these interactions. This use of emotional labor should be a concern for all libraries and librarians as it can cause emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and lower job satisfaction. It can even lead to burnout if care is not taken.

Librarians need to have this knowledge presented to them through training or other means. Emotional labor should be something all librarians are trained about, specifically about what surface acting is, and how they are likely to use it, but also about what deep acting is, and how they might save themselves negative repercussions by resorting to deep acting when they can. However, it is apparent that being a librarian is always going to require some amount of surface acting, and librarians need to find healthy ways to cope. Managers should stand firm in creating a “backstage” area away from the prying eyes and ears of patrons. This means shutting doors to staff areas and allowing staff to share about uncomfortable and angry patron interactions. By providing proper training to librarians about emotional labor and paying special attention to creating a culture that is accepting of healthy sharing, managers can decrease the stress and burnout public service librarians experience.

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