The Academic Library as a Caring Assemblage

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Introduction

Gaps between the academic success outcomes of privileged and underrepresented minority (URM) students call out for innovative ideas.[1] This paper presents findings from research that describes the experiences of a diverse group of students in academic libraries, with the aim of addressing how academic libraries may work to reduce these inequities in academic success outcomes. It employs a qualitative case study methodology, inspired by the larger-scale ERIAL and University of Rochester Undergraduate Research projects.[2] Pivoting to academic libraries' role in URM student persistence, it follows Bodaghi and colleagues and Scoulas's studies to focus on how their experiences in such spaces foster belonging, which has been linked to persistence among URM students in higher education research.[3]

To garner emic perspectives on where meaningful experiences occurred in library physical spaces, it employed participant reflexive photography.[4] Based on this visual content, the photo-elicitation interviews with twenty-four students at two majority-minority Hispanic and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (HSI, AANAPISI) in the American Southwest are the main dataset for this study.[5] From this content, this paper reports on an analysis of responses to "places you feel cared about," one of the seven photography and interview prompts.

Care is a fraught concept in librarianship.[6] On the one hand, receiving it has been associated with developing a sense of belonging among URM students.[7] On the other hand, providing it recalls the historical devaluation of librarianship as affective labor.[8] This paper reviews the literature connected to librarians providing care and students receiving care, with reference to its role in persistence. Critically, however, the paper's dataset suggests that care is not exclusively the purview of library staff. Instead, places in the library, the library itself, and technology and furniture convey care distinct from or in concert with library staff. For this reason, this paper employs assemblage theory to contextualize and analyze participants' descriptions of being cared about through combinations of physical, affective, technological, and material interactions in library spaces.[9]

This paper concludes with the implications of students' perception of care in academic library spaces and a reflection on how assemblage theory may be useful in addressing current challenges in academic librarianship. Recommendations include an elevation of the role of an ethic of care, with the development of training materials and documents that integrate it, a

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consideration of how to honor the contributions of library staff whose work provides care, and a reevaluation of the role of library spaces, which, through fostering care, are connected to belonging and thereby persistence.

Literature Review

Since the latter part of the nineteenth century librarianship has been associated with women stereotyped as caregivers.[10] Efforts to move away from this association, mainly to elevate librarian status and compensation, have led to a tension between library staff providing care and being perceived as professionals.[11] One resolution of this tension has been to reject the devaluation of library staff affective labor as the product of patriarchal higher education cultures. This has been countered with its revalorizations through embracing the principles of a feminist ethic of care, grounded in Gilligan and Tronto's work on care expressed mainly through relationships.[12]

This reappraisal of library affective labor acknowledges that the libraries of the twenty-first century are complex places where care is no longer predominantly connected to librarians at reference desks. Indeed, library staff describe their applications of an ethic of care in various capacities, including through library instruction programs,[13] developing open educational resources (OER),[14] and in archives.[15] Encapsulating this diffusion of care throughout library services, Higgins states, "in the way we structure our spaces, services, and programs we can draw on our capacity to empathize, and be sensitive to the affective qualities of our work."[16]

Whether from personal interactions or in other ways conveyed by a library, how patrons' experience library staff efforts to convey care is an under-researched topic. An example of personal care is Bodaghi and colleagues' research on the impact of care provided by librarians to visually impaired college students.[17] They found that students felt valued, respected, accepted, and developed a sense of belonging depending on how friendly, helpful, and supportive the librarians were.[18] Analogously, in higher education research, the relationship between professor caring and student outcomes has been considered in several studies.[19] Specifically, professor care, both in and out of classroom contexts, has been associated with increased motivation to be successful academically and professionally,[20] and with developing a sense of belonging.[21]

In terms of how physical libraries convey care, Brewster's study of public libraries as therapeutic landscapes represents one line of inquiry.[22] Therapeutic qualities of the libraries participants noted include that "people were friendly and open" and "incredibly friendly and nice,"[23] that the spaces were "safe, non-challenging…comfortable" and "very tranquil…relaxed [and] calm" and that they were equipped with "recommended books," a "nice seating area…really nice food…and…computers you can use."[24] Thus, the library was therapeutic due to a combination of people, affect, physical items, furniture, and atmosphere which together conveyed something healing, analogous to care. Neurohr and Bailey's study of first-generation undergraduate students' use of an academic library came to similar conclusions, but with direct reference to care.[25] They found that "first-generation students perceive the library as 'caring' about them because it provides spaces with furnishings and resources that are important for supporting their goals."[26] Moreover, they noted that several participants perceived the library "as a living, breathing entity and a place established with sensitivity to student needs,"[27] which suggests the library has agency as an entity inclusive of material, technological, and affective elements.[28]

Deleuze and Guattari, who originated the concept of assemblage, state that they have four elements, "1) content and expression; 2) territoriality and deterritorialization."[29] That is, humans, physical items, machines, and affect form content and establish a territory; however, as an unstable entity, it will then deterritorialize.[30] In Brewster's and in Neurohr and Bailey's studies, there is reference to a combination of elements—staff, materials, rooms, sound levels—that are characteristic of library assemblages. In Brewster's study, a quiet place with comfortable seats and a recommended book come together and produce an affect labeled "therapeutic." In Neurohr and Bailey's study, students experience the thoughtfulness of a stapler placed next to a printer as "care." While assemblages may form repeatedly in ways similar to what these study participants described, each combination, that is, each assemblage, represents a unique territorialization. It lasts during the time when the assemblage ele-

ments interact in a particular place. For example, a patron asks for a book recommendation. The librarian may interact with a library website on a computer to identify and find a book, walk with the patron to retrieve the book, and do these actions with a friendly demeanor. They may then walk the patron to a comfortable seating area. The persons, librarian and patron; materials, book and chair; technology, library website and a computer; territory, service desk, spaces of the service desk and between it and the stacks and between the stacks and the seating area; affect, friendly demeanor; and atmosphere, calm and quiet, constitute an assemblage. The time that the assemblage exists is the time when these elements come together. When the patron sits down and reads the book, this assemblage deterritorializes.

While this characterization of libraries as assemblages or multiple assemblages is somewhat novel, others have discussed it, mainly with regard to libraries' social and political roles. Gerolami's view, for example, is that library assemblages' purpose is "to achieve social justice,"[31] which is similar to Rivano Eckerdal's view that public libraries as assemblages should be understood as a verb, meaning to become "positive for democracy."[32] This paper, aligned with Brewster and Neurohr and Bailey's findings, views academic libraries as being the territories for multiple forming and dissolving assemblages that generally have a more affective than political role.[33]

In keeping with this affective focus, this paper uses terminology from the relevant literature. Specifically, based on Ivanova and colleagues and Bowlby's findings, smaller scale care-focused assemblages are referred to as carescapes.[34] On the macro level, large-scale assemblages with therapeutic roles, have been referred to as "affective community space[s]."[35] Warner and colleagues, for example, use this term to describe the assemblage of social, spatial, and affective elements in a café that convey "vital forms of care that are central to people's lives."[36]

Needing more exploration are the mechanisms for how care is conveyed by assemblages, especially in connection to belonging and persistence. To this end, it is helpful to elucidate how feelings of belonging occur in physical spaces, according to relevant studies. Specifically, Wright describes how positive affect, such as support and care from assemblages, may be reciprocated as belonging. They state, "Thinking closely about day-to-day performances of belonging…allows us to attend to more-than-human aspects that may act to generate feelings of belonging."[37] There can also be an accumulation of affective interactions. Library regulars may feel a sense of spatial belonging due to repeated experiences of being cared for. For example, Mohseni and colleagues note that memories are a factor for belonging, which "enable participants to attach emotions…to a place."[38] In this vein, Scoulas, in their study of sense of belonging for university students, found that students who perceived that their identities were reflected in the library's physical collections, viewed librarians as supporting their academic success, and who felt welcomed in library spaces, reciprocated these experiences through their sense of belonging.[39] Indeed, belonging could be interpreted as the cumulative impact of library assemblages, both human and nonhuman, caring for the students.

Methods

Data for this paper, consisting of excerpts from 24 photo-elicitation interviews and the corresponding participant-generated photographs, have been drawn from a larger comparative qualitative case study.[40] The two sites, pseudonymously named Southwestern University (SWU) and Southwestern Community College (SWCC), are an urban R1 university and a large urban multicampus predominantly associates degree granting college, in the United States Southwest. Both are majority-minority HSIs and AANAPISIs.

Participants were recruited in the Fall 2020 semester through flyers deployed in person at the main campus libraries and online to an official student events and resources website, through distribution by faculty, by staff at a Multicultural Center, and through snowball sampling.[41] The main criteria were that participants had to be undergraduates who were regular library users. As at that time social distancing measures were in place, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences pre-pandemic in their choices of what to photograph and in their subsequent interviews. This paper's participants are the 24 out of 28 total participants in the larger study

who identified and reflected in the interviews on photographs they had taken which correspond to the prompt, "places you feel cared about." These participants are highly diverse (see Table 1), consisting of 15 women and 9 men, 79% (19 of 24) of whom are Students of Color, 75% (18 of 24) first generation college students, and 42% (10 of 24) non-traditional aged. Each participant had the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and choose a pseudonym. Assigned and chosen pseudonyms are listed in Table 1.

The prompt, "places you feel cared about" was chosen, as were the other six prompts, due to their associations with students developing a sense of belonging.[42] In the initial data analysis, care was therefore a deductive code based on this association. Coding, using MAXQDA software, applied the constant comparative method.[43] As code clusters were identified, analytic memos were used to memorialize patterns identified in the data.[44] Through these memos, two distinct ways that students talked about care were identified, care associated with a person and physical items and care attributed to the library or places in the library, without reference to any person providing care. These became the emergent themes of "the library cares about me" and "she really cares"

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Site	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	1st Gen. College Student
Abril	SWCC	Female	18-24	White/European	Yes
Alexa	SWCC	Female	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic, White/European	No
Amelia	SWCC	Female	25-29	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Angela	SWU	Female	18-24	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian/Asian American	Yes
Ariana	SWCC	Female	25-29	White/European	Yes
Bianca	SWCC	Male	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Devin	SWU	Male	25-29	White/European	Yes
Emma	SWU	Female	18-24	Asian/Asian American, White/European	No
Frank	SWU	Male	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Gabriela	SWU	Female	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Isaac	SWCC	Male	25-29	Black/African American	Yes
Kebra	SWCC	Male	30-39	Black/African American	No
Lauren	SWU	Female	18-24	White/European	No
Liliana	SWU	Female	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Makayla	SWCC	Female	30-39	Black/African American, White/European	No
Mariah	SWU	Female	18-24	Asian/Asian American	Yes
Mariam	SWCC	Female	40-49	Black/African American, Ethiopian	Yes
Menelik	SWCC	Male	30-39	Black/African American	Yes
Michaela	SWCC	Female	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Mike	SWCC	Male	50-59	White/European	Yes
Pearl	SWCC	Female	18-24	Asian/Asian American	Yes
Shirong	SWCC	Male	25-29	Asian/Asian American	Yes
Sierra	SWU	Female	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	Yes
Toby	SWCC	Male	18-24	Latinx/Hispanic	No

which are quotations from participants.[45] Further analysis grounded in these emergent themes led to identifying assemblage theory as a framework to understand how participants described feeling cared about.

The qualitative coding for this paper focused on the content associated with care. For SWCC, of the 907 total coded segments, 35 segments were coded "cared about/caring." For SWU, of the 695 total coded sections, 22 were coded "cared about." These 57 segments were then recoded based on the deductive codes: territorialization, agency, assemblage, and care, grounded in the literature review conducted for this paper.[46]

Limitations

As the dataset is a portion of that of a qualitative research study, the findings in this paper are not generalizable. It is hoped, however, that they may resonate with the experiences of library staff and library users at other academic libraries. Moreover, this paper's characterization of academic library assemblages as conveyers of care only applies to students who are regular physical library users. It may not represent the experiences of other students who have different types of interactions or no interactions whatsoever with their academic library.[47] Indeed, negative experiences, such as microaggressions, that may lead to feelings of unbelonging in academic libraries, are reported in several studies.[48] Last, the primary investigator is a middle aged cisgender heterosexual white male librarian. Interviewees may have modified their responses to express ideas that they perceived to be acceptable to the individual conducting the interview, skewing the data.[49]

Data Presentation and Analysis

The theme, the academic library as a caring assemblage, has several subthemes based on the types of assemblages, whether people are included or not, whether care is connected to a specific place within the library or is a quality of the entire library, how care is transmitted, which connects to the role of affect, and the process of how care is reciprocated through belonging. In the data presentation, these subthemes are represented by interview excerpts.

"It's Kind of the Library That Cares about Me"

Emma, a traditional aged multiracial SWU student, liked to meet and study with friends in social study areas, but, as this excerpt reflects, appreciated all of the options available to her in the library.

> It's kind of the library that cares about me, because they are providing all these resources. We wouldn't really have these whiteboards or just these group study areas anywhere else really that I can think of in [Southwest City]…the library cares, because how there's just all that space for multiple groups, and just in general how there's different settings around the library to cater to the students' needs. There's the quiet areas, those more private desks, but there's also group study areas with the whiteboards. There's plugs everywhere, just different types of seating.

Emma attributes care to the library due to the variety of material, spatial, and technological affordances it provides.[50] She is one of seven study participants who perceived the library as having agency, which it uses to communicate care in various ways.[51] The furnishing of what may be considered ordinary academic study materials, spaces, and technologies in another context are perceived, in the library, as the kindness of the collective library entity.

"Everything You Need to Succeed"

Ariana, quoted below, is a first-generation white SWCC student in her late 20s.

> There's a lot of detail that goes into actually making these places look the way they do. It looks like somebody thought about it, they care about our students, because they give us everything you need to succeed… But when you come here to this campus or any of the [SWCC] campuses, you actually see that they're well designed, well cared for...And people, like I said, they care about you here.…so I go to the reference people….and they actually help me find [books].… so I feel like they cared about me, because they don't really be rude about it. They're like, yeah, I'll help you…and it's not just a quick, "hey, here's your book, get out of my face" kind of thing.

Ariana perceives care in both material and interpersonal aspects of her library experiences.[52] Care is Ariana's interpretation of the assemblage of campus buildings and landscapes, and the librarians and technologies they use to expedite finding books.[53] Unlike Emma's amorphous caring agent, Ariana's imagery evokes architects designing a space that actuates care by giving students "everything [they] need to succeed" with the reference people (i.e., librarians) the visible care providers. The multiple ways that care manifests points to a history of Ariana's experiences in which, as Bowlby states, "care lies in the role of memory and habituation."[54] Moreover, Ariana's descriptions reflect that, as Ivanova and colleagues found, "carescapes are unstable assembled phenomena, where social and material objects interact by forming short-lived equilibriums."[55] Therefore, the library's repeated and varying, generally short-lived assemblages, such as those at the reference desk, enable it to become, for some students, a "carescape."

"She Just Solved My Problem"

Mariam, quoted below, is a middle age black woman originally from Ethiopia. As her time was limited, balancing two children and working full time with her schoolwork, she dedicated her library time to serious solo work.

> So a lady came out and I said, "I just did my work, but I have to take it to my class. I don't know how to take it. Can you show me how I can put it in my drive?" Like I said, I'm really problem in technology.… she said, "I'll get you a flash"…She came out and she gave me a flash…She just solved my problem…that was really handy for my work that day…I couldn't forget it, because normally this is my own thing that I have to deal with how to save my work… but the fact that she brought it and said, "Here you go. You can do it like this," and she solved that, it was caring…I didn't expect her to do that, so that's why I couldn't forget it… Yeah, but that left an impression for me. That's all...Actually, it's all about [SWCC] to be honest with you. Those small experiences which add up, like there's no [SWCC]…

FIGURE 1

Mariam's Photograph of the Doors Where the Library Staff Member with the Flash Drive Entered the Library. Mariam would have been sitting in the foreground

> [SWCC] is abstract, but those daily experiences will change your impression for the good or for the worst.

Such "small experiences" make an "impression." The attribution of "care" to the receiving of the flash drive and its impact on Mariam, represents an interpretation of the accumulation of such bodily impressions, or affects.[56] The fulfilling of the expectations of the library staff position, the everyday lending or giving students anatomy models, books, pencils, scantrons, and blue books recalled by study participants, accumulate as such impressions. As Shirong, an international SWCC student from China, stated, "I feel like even though it's their job, their willingness to help you is more…[They] kind of care for you." Such care replaced, for Mariam, SWCC as an abstract idea to a place where she could belong and persist in her education. Massumi's contention that "With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life-a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and with other places"[57] seems confirmed in Mariam's experiences.

"Now I Care for the Students"

Angela is a traditional aged SWU student from a Pacific Island. She has found a community in the library both from regularly engaging in social study with students from the same island and through her student worker position. Here, she describes how her journey from new student to library worker has connected to care.

FIGURE 2

Angela's Photograph of the Circulation Desk

> Since I was so new, I really wasn't comfortable talking to the professors or anything, so I felt like since it's the Circulation's job, they have to talk to me, so I went up there and I didn't really expect a response. I thought their response was going to be robotic and "here, just go to this and just come back and do whatever," but they really took the time to show me the floors. There were even points in time where they went up with me and they just brought their walkie-talkie and they're like, "Okay, let me go help you find this specific book," and they…actually helped me look for the book, which I thought I've never seen that before in any other place that I've been, so I thought, wow, they really care about helping me find the book and making sure that I wasn't lost. They were really nice and they really helped me out and they said if I need anything else, I could just always come back down and I genuinely didn't know how the library works, so I kept coming back to the front desk and asking them, "I don't know where this is. Do you know where this is?" or "I'm not sure how to print. How do I do this?" and I felt like everybody in the Circ Desk really cares about all their students…now I care for the students and I help them… We genuinely care about the students. We want them to feel comfortable in the library.

While professors caring about their students has been demonstrated to be an important factor for student motivation and developing a sense of belonging, Angela does not think that such relationships are available to her.[58] Instead, because she believes that "it's the Circulation's job, they have to talk to me," she chose this place to make a connection. Instead of something perfunctory, she received something that she perceived as genuine care.[59]

Unlike Emma, who attributes care to the entire library, Angela attributes it to the Circulation Desk. Clearly not the desk as a physical structure, it is the totality of the assemblages that the Circulation Desk becomes in its interactions with students that Angela discusses. This is akin to Dovey's description of an urban street. The interactions of businesses, cars, residences, pavement, streetlights, and pedestrians become the street assemblage repeatedly.[60] In its role as a space connected to care within the larger library environment, the Circulation Desk may be considered a carescape.[61] However, its central role as a hub for territorializations that radiate care lead to it being a key place that establishes, over time, the library as an "affective community space."[62] Two-thirds of participants (16 of 24) identified a carescape within the library, prominent among these being the Circulation Desk, Reference Desk, and Tutoring Center. Such places claim at territory, which, as in Angela's case, extends beyond the physical space to whichever floor the book is located. The space is wherever the agents in the space, whether human or nonhuman move to, during the time when the assemblage claims a territory. Together, they are an assemblage, embody a carescape, and are agents of the larger affective community space.

Another element in Angela's narrative is the reciprocity between the initial receiving of care and the later providing of care. Being far away from home, thrust into a very different culture, Angela is at a heightened risk to not persist.[63] Being cared about establishes a connection, which is reciprocated as belonging.[64] Belonging, however, need not be to a group of people, as has been the most commonly held view.[65] Instead, it can be to a place.[66] Mohseni and colleagues note that memories, and shared values and skills can be factors in developing place belongingness.[67] This occurs in Angela's case. She not only feels a sense of belonging, she comes to embody the values and learn the skills as she becomes a care provider to vulnerable students, thus continuing a virtuous cycle of care and belonging.

Discussion & Implications

This paper joins a conversation on the roles of library spaces in students' lives. It finds that care may underlie the capacity of academic libraries to welcome diverse students[68] and to foster belonging.[69] Analyses of historical associations of librarians with providing care and explorations of the application of an ethic of care in libraries have

not previously explored how patrons and in particular, college students, experience this care in library spaces. This paper fills this gap, demonstrating that there is a throughline linking caring decisions in layout, furniture, and technology and caring behavior of library staff with perceptions of this care by students.

To understand the relationship between the provision and perception of care, it applied assemblage theory. Using this framework, it examined how care is expressed through materials, spaces, technologies, and people discretely and in varying configurations. It provided heuristics to understand the multiple ways students can express how care functions in library spaces. Specifically, it examined the perception of a library as a caring agent and places in the library as carescapes, the impact of repeated experiences of care on students, and the concept of academic libraries as affective community spaces. Critically, it linked these various ways of perceiving care with belonging and persistence, making the case for belonging in connection to library spaces in addition to in library community.[70]

Among the implications of understanding academic libraries as caring assemblages are the following:

1. Practicing an ethic of care matters, at every staffing level and in every aspect of academic libraries. Students perceive this care, whether it manifests through furniture choices, lesson plans, or interactions with staff. The perception of care makes a difference through fostering belonging and making the library a welcoming place for diverse students to feel at home[71] and comfortable on campus.[72]
2. Care contributes to improving student success outcomes. As belonging has been related to persistence, especially among URM students, the connection between care and belonging is a critical element in articulating to stakeholders the relationships between providing, furnishing and staffing library space, and improving student success outcomes.[73]
3. Those who contribute to persistence through care fostering belonging should be acknowledged and compensated for their efforts. The individuals who choose the furniture and layout, the frontline student worker who gives a patron a scantron or a flash drive, and a librarian helping a student with research or finding a book all provide care which contributes to persistence.
4. While care may already permeate academic libraries, based on this study, it needs an infrastructure to be sustained. Training on the concepts and application of an ethic of care to library services and facilities could be one aspect of this infrastructure. Another could be to revise foundational documents, such as RUSA's Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers with an integration of an ethic of care.[74]

Last, this paper demonstrates how assemblage theory along with concepts related to an ethic of care can provide a framework to better understand how humans and nonhumans interact in academic libraries. At least since the late nineteenth century, academic libraries have had qualities consistent with caring assemblages. Interacting with books, physical and electronic catalogs and databases, computers and other technologies, library staff have been assisting patrons in accessing materials, conducting research, and utilizing suitable places to read and study. Conceptualizing these relationships as a caring assemblage provides academic libraries with another way to articulate relevance, particularly that of physical library spaces, in our rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Notes

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