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# BEYOND SELF-CARE:

## *Forging Sustainable Practices in Academic Librarianship*

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“Academic reference librarians do not seem to be especially prone to burnout”  
~ Smith & Nelson, 1983<sup>1</sup>

“In Kristenson’s 2005 study, ‘The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory: A new tool for the assessment of burnout,’...Midwives experienced the highest score at 43.5...Librarian scores are 6.1 points higher on the [burnout scale] than the highest number found by Kristenson.” ~ Wood, Guimaraes, Holm, Hayes, & Brooks 2020<sup>2</sup>

Academic librarians face burnout at levels that are rarely seen in other occupations, as reflected in Wood et al.’s study. It wasn’t always so; the 1983 study by Smith & Nelson came to the opposite conclusion. But a lot has changed in the intervening 30 years- and the Covid pandemic certainly hasn’t improved circumstances.

## ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND BURNOUT

In the introduction to *Academic Librarian Burnout: Causes and Responses* (2022), co-editor Ana Guimaraes lists some of the most common factors that lead to burnout in our field, including external ones like “annual budget cuts, depressed and suppressed wages, lack of support from university administrators, organizational restructuring, and jumping through bureaucratic hoops to fill vacant positions” as well as “the toll our own expectations inflict on our collective psyche; the emotional labor, the culture of subservience to our teaching faculty counterparts, abusive supervisors and other library administrators, uncivil colleagues, the fear of retaliation, the ‘doing more with less’ mentality”<sup>3</sup>

Let’s look at instruction librarians as just one type of academic librarian who can suffer from burnout. Instruction librarians can also have unrealistic expectations about their professional role. In 2018, Fobazi Ettahr shook the library world with her *In the Library With A Lead Pipe* piece, “Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves.” Vocational awe “refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique”<sup>4</sup>. In his 2017 article, Ross Todd identified a similar idealistic view of information literacy, stating that the field is “a concept resting on the platform of ‘goodness’ of libraries to deliver or rescue people”<sup>5</sup> Place these ideas together, and we see that instruction librarianship can easily be put on a pedestal. While it can feel nice to be championed and venerated as saviors, it is not realistic. The misinformation/disinformation crisis is one example. When the phrase “fake news” came to the forefront in 2016, conventional wisdom held that the embrace of misinformation and disinformation was an information literacy problem and that librarians could solve it. But of course, changing the sharing and consumption of news could not be fixed with more workshops on evaluating Websites;<sup>6</sup> the information ecosystem is too vast and complicated. Librarians may play a part in the fight against “fake news,” but we could never be



the sole solution. When we create unrealistic expectations for ourselves or fail to achieve the lofty goals set up for us by ourselves, colleagues, and outsiders, it is demoralizing and leads to that reduced sense of personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion that causes burnout.

## ROLE OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

The idea of imposter syndrome first appeared in Clance and Imes's 1978 book, *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention*. The authors found that some people, and women in particular, believed their success was due to luck or having worked harder than others rather than intrinsic talent, leading them to believe they were not as competent as those around them. This internalized message could at times paralyze them, fearing others would 'find out' they weren't qualified to be in their position. Research studying imposter syndrome has found it prevalent in academia, especially women, so it's not surprising that academic librarians have been drawn to this idea. In a 2016 ACRLog post, Callie Wiygul Branstiter wrote, "Imposter syndrome hit me hard as soon as I entered the job market. As I perused job announcements and skimmed the required and preferred qualification sections, a sinking feeling crept into my chest: How will anyone ever hire me without experience? How will I gain this necessary experience when all of these job announcements want candidates *with* experience? Do my MLIS and various internships fall short of this requirement? **Will I ever get a job?** Those fears may have subsided when I received my first job offer, but the sentiment definitely followed me into the first year of professional employment."<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Erin Miller shared that writing her CV could bring feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem; learning about "imposter syndrome" helped her realize that she was not alone in these feelings.<sup>8</sup> In their 2019 study, Martinez and Forrey found that "at some point in their work as a librarian, 84.9% of respondents felt insecure, underqualified, or in danger of being discovered a fraud."<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps we also need to interrogate the entire concept of imposter syndrome. Many of the issues we've identified have their roots in systems and reflect societal ills. To try and shift the blame to individuals' personal flaws is disingenuous, if not downright harmful. As Nicola Andrews in her piece *It's Not Imposter Syndrome: Resisting Self-Doubt As Normal For Library Workers* asks, "When are we going to stop signalling that fear and anxiety is normal within our profession, and instead examine how these narratives are the result of institutions deflecting the need for change?"<sup>10</sup> I would argue that the same systems that lead to imposter syndrome also cause burnout.

## SYSTEMIC REASONS FOR BURNOUT

If you are a woman in Western society, you face chronic stressors related to your gender every day. Librarianship is an overwhelmingly female occupation. In its most recent demographic study from 2017, ALA shared that 81% of self-identifying members selected "Female" in response to the question "What is your gender?"

In their book *Burnout*, Nagoski & Nagoski sum it up as "one damn thing after another...it's a constant, low-level stream of stressors that are out of your control. Most individual examples are little more than an annoyance... but they accumulate."<sup>11</sup> The authors also discuss the "Human Giver Syndrome", which they define as "the deeply buried, unspoken assumption that women should give everything, every moment of their lives, every drop of energy, to the care of others."<sup>12</sup> It's easy to see how being subjected to such misogyny can add to burnout in your job.

Kaetrina Kendrick's work on low morale in library workers has further exposed problems in the system, particularly for librarians of color. Minority academic librarians especially reported suffering from workplace bullying and other emotional abuse, and found the existing structures in place did little to help them. Power differentials due to tenure or faculty status could lead to "tenured faculty were excused for uncivil behavior and they were more likely to use their tenure status to sabotage tenure-track colleagues"<sup>13</sup> Librarians of color reported little help from Human Resources, who placed the burden of proof on victims and claimed policies tied their hands from protecting the librarians.

## NEOLIBERALISM: WORK WON'T LOVE YOU BACK

Greenwood defines neoliberalism as four characteristic political and economic beliefs: "the rule of the 'free'

market, the reduction of governmental expenditures for welfare and social services, the deregulation of as many aspects of the economy as possible, the privatization of as many state-owned or public enterprises as possible and the destruction of the concept of the 'public good' and its substitution with individual responsibility and individual consequences"<sup>14</sup> We can see neoliberalism play out in higher education in numerous ways, including views of education as a private good and students as customers, and the resulting decrease in governmental funding of higher education and rise in student debt. Many articles have discussed the neoliberal effect on academic libraries, pointing to libraries' constant struggles to 'prove' their financial worth and their role in student success.<sup>15</sup> Neoliberalism has many negative repercussions, but I want to focus on two which I think especially contribute to burnout in academic librarians.

First, let's tackle the emphasis (and perhaps obsession) with innovation. As described in the article "Innovation as a neoliberal 'silver bullet,'" the free market is the best judge of what a society needs; the market offers and if the customer buys, then that's the right offering. But this corporate perspective demands continual new offerings (i.e., innovations) so that the customer will keep buying.<sup>16</sup> This leads to a "fetish belief": innovation can virtually any problem.

Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel are two researchers who have been writing about the problems with innovation for years, with titles like "Let's Get Excited About Maintenance!" and "The Innovation Delusion." As they explain, the word has become a buzzword, "used as a stand-in for practical values like efficiency and convenience or altruistic values like kindness and tolerance."<sup>17</sup> While they come from a technology background, their work explores the idea of innovation broadly and is easily related to our field.

In her blog post, "Valuing Maintenance," Meredith Farkas shares the story of her library's award winning Information Literacy Teaching Materials toolkit. "The whole point of it was that as we librarians made stuff in the future that we were happy with (a tutorial, a video, an activity we did in class), we would document it and have it added to the toolkit. Do you know how many instruction librarians have added or updated content in the past five years? I'm pretty sure it's just been me. I know my colleagues are making things. They are brilliant and talented instructors who design excellent learning activities. But because our department doesn't place value on sharing our work or incrementally improving our existing infrastructure, no one makes time to document and add or update content or even to market what we already offer. We plan for the short-term and move on to the next shiny thing (or dumpster fire) that grabs our attention."<sup>18</sup>

Every now and then, a discussion will break out in library land about the use of "Rock star" to describe certain librarians who were garnering popular attention. Often these librarians were providing services that were unusual and outside of the academic library norm. Rather than people resenting the attention their colleagues were getting, many were concerned that the recognition did not extend to all the co-workers who had to do the 'unsexy' regular work to keep the library actually running. While it can be exciting to take on new projects- especially ones that garner accolades- it should be recognized that this reallocation of time often means stepping back from routine but essential tasks like staffing public service desks and teaching classes- and that someone else will have to step up to do that work. It can be exhausting to be on either end of this equation; you are either expected to keep coming up with new 'innovative' ideas, or have to cover the work for others who have been reassigned to these efforts. And virtually never is the maintenance for these efforts planned for or rewarded.

Second, neoliberalism has encouraged the further blurring of work and life. Between World War Two and the 1970s, Fordism, named after Henry Ford's self-named motor company was the major economic system. The Fordist compromise placed industrial workers in an uneasy truce with their bosses. As described by Jaffe in her book, *Work Won't Love You Back*, "Workers would give up a large chunk of their time, but a manageable one... to the boss and in return they would get a decent paycheck, health care...and maybe some paid holidays and a pension to retire on."<sup>19</sup> There were clashes as management tried to squeeze more work out of the employees, and employees held strikes to try and improve their bargain, but the system held together until the 1970s when global crises, stagflation, etc proved to be too much and politicians like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher began moving the Western world into a more neoliberal direction. People worked more, and for less.

As we spent more time with work, cliches about "loving what you do" began entering the zeitgeist. Sarah Jaffe argues that this is a design, not a bug, of our capitalistic system. "It's become especially important that we believe that the work itself is something to love. If we recalled why we work in the first place- to pay the bills- we might wonder why we're working so much for so little."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, as we spend more time at work and see it as something we should love, we invest more of emotional self into our jobs. Since 1989, Gallup polls have shown that a majority of United States workers report their job gives them an identity. The number is even higher in professions like librarianship. “Education is one of the most significant predictors of how workers approach their job, with 70% of college graduates saying they get a sense of their identity from the job”<sup>21</sup> One doesn’t simply work as a librarian; you ARE a librarian.

This viewpoint has economic implications. Akerlof and Kranton, pioneers in the field of identity economics, first tied job satisfaction to a worker’s sense of identity, and then studied the effort put into their jobs. They found that workers who identified strongly with their workplace were more intrinsically motivated. Perhaps forebodingly, they conclude that workers who think of themselves as ‘insiders’ require less pay in order to put in effort.<sup>22</sup>

King et al. posit that people who are insiders often view themselves as such in relation to the profession, not the specific workplace. They write, “Individuals with strong sentiments of calling describe finding their jobs supporting their skills, gifts, and talents in addition to deep alignment between their occupation and identity... lead[ing] individuals to pursue a profession first... and a specific job second.”<sup>23</sup> We can see that identity economics has a strong connection to the vocational awe framework- and can remember how that leads to burnout.

## SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

The nonstop demands for us to keep giving more to our work, to always be increasing our numbers, improving what we already do, and invent new things to work on, is exhausting us as a profession. The breakdown of care and support in our society has sped up the destruction. This is well beyond any yoga class or meditation app.

We might find some paths forward by looking at the literature on sustainability in careers. In 2010, Pfeffer examined the idea of social sustainability, inspired by the work done on environmental and ecological sustainability. Pfeffer argued that humans should be considered in discussion of sustainable practices, stating “Just as physical sustainability considers the consequences of organizational activity for material, physical resources, social sustainability might consider how organizational activities affect people’s physical and mental health and well being- the stress of work practices on the human system- as well as effects of management practices such as work hours and behaviors that produce workplace stress on groups and group cohesion.”<sup>24</sup> Building on this idea, Newman says a sustainable career is one that is interested in “protecting and fostering (rather than depleting) human and career development with a focus on balance and renewal”

So what practices might we adopt that nourish our careers? I have developed a list of suggestions which I share below. I provide them recognizing that my privileges as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual woman in middle management means they may be simpler for me to achieve. I will also say I’m still firmly in the “do as I say, not as I do,” stage, and many of these are aspirational for me. Given all those disclaimers, I offer the following with the hope they may inspire you to think how the sustainability framework can help you and your colleagues.

1. **Solidarity.** In many interviews about her book, Jaffe was asked what is the answer to employee exploitation. Virtually every time, she responded with, “Unionize.” She reasoned that because it is the system that is corrupt, individuals cannot make meaningful change. [mention chapter on academic unions]. Your institution may also have a senate or assembly in which you can become involved, allowing you to lobby for and sometimes craft more humane policies. If you are a manager, consider how you can build solidarity within your unit.
2. **Slow down.** In response to the ever-increasing demands for us to do more, produce more, in less time and with less resources, slow movements have cropped up in many areas. Slow is an approach to life. “it is about making real and meaningful connections- with people, culture, work, food, everything”<sup>25</sup> Within academia, Berg & Seeber have published *The Slow Professor*, which includes suggestions for finding joy in our teaching, and Mountz et al. wrote “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University.”<sup>26</sup> Suggestions from the latter include openly discussing when productivity demands are unrealistic/impossible; recognizing the value of work that doesn’t currently count as ‘scholarship,’ such as mentoring, and focusing on the input as well as the output of research. Within librarianship, Glassman calls for slowing down by focusing on our students’ needs and interests, rather than chasing after administrators’ ever-changing visions.

3. Scalability, sustainability. When we propose a new project, we should explicitly talk about not just development, but operationalization. It's much more fun to create something than to maintain it, but too often we end up with too many projects on our plate, or have projects in dire need of loving care. I'm a big proponent of project management, and believe a well-worded scope document can save you heart ache down the road. When planning for a project, we should build into it plans for how to manage it after it's launched. If you have student workers or professional staff, can they help with the operational side? Talk about this before you begin! We are also famous for being "victims of our own success," where a one-off or small project proves to be so popular, we become overwhelmed with requests to replicate it. As a manager, discuss with your colleagues ways you might conclude how successful a project is. Let's say you are hosting an outreach event. What is the minimum attendance needed to make you repeat the offering? If it exceeds that, is there room to add more events? Consider how much you can scale a new offering before you start it.
4. Silo breakdowns. It's easy to get caught up in your day-to-day work and not talk as much with colleagues in other units. If you don't see how your work connects with the rest of the library or with the university, though, it can lead to a sense of disengagement and ultimately, futility. Fighting against the silos and keeping in contact with others can help build up solidarity opportunities, too.
5. Interrogate your sense of self. Academia can be very isolating; many of us have to move away from friends and families to get that first job. Once you're miles away from everyone you know, it's natural to make friends with colleagues at your library and/or university. Maybe you're on the tenure track or have an interest in scholarship, and you spend your 'free' time researching and writing about issues in librarianship. And thanks to technology, your email and voicemail are never farther away than your phone. Before you know it, the 'life' part of your work/life looks a lot like the work part. I hope you do enjoy your work; we devote 40 hours a week to it. But remember that your work will never love you back, no matter how much of your heart and soul you pour into it. Whether you are a manager or individual, search for joy outside of work. Take your available PTO and retain boundaries when away from work. If you go to yoga, do so because you enjoy it- not so your employer can extract more work from you.

## NOTES

1. Smith and Nelson, "Burnout."
2. Wood et al., "Academic Librarian Burnout."
3. Holm, Guimaraes, and Marcano, *Academic Librarian Burnout*.
4. Ettahr, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship," 3.
5. Todd, "Information Literacy," 125.
6. Literacy, "Lizard People in the Library | PIL Provocation Series."
7. Branstiter, "Do I Have to Be An Expert?"
8. Miller, "Low Self-Esteem and the Academic Librarian. Maybe It Is Just Me. It Is Probably Just Me."
9. Martinez and Forrey, "Overcoming Imposter Syndrome."
10. Nicola Andrews, "It's Not Imposter Syndrome."
11. Nagoski and Nagoski, *Burnout*, 76.
12. Nagoski and Nagoski, 81.
13. Kendrick and Damasco, "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians," 191.
14. Greenwood, "Bologna in America," 3.
15. Beilin, "Student Success and the Neoliberal Academic Library"; Karen P. Nicholson, "The McDonalidization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change"; Budd, "A Critique of Customer and Commodity |."
16. Ord, "Innovation as a Neoliberal 'Silver Bullet.'"
17. Vinsel, *The Innovation Delusion*, 14.
18. Farkas, "Valuing Maintenance | Information Wants To Be Free."
19. Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*, 8.
20. Jaffe, 12.
21. Inc, "In U.S., 55% of Workers Get Sense of Identity From Their Job."
22. Akerlof and Kranton, *Identity Economics*, 59.
23. King et al., "Reimagining Attraction and Retention of Hospitality Management Talent- A Multilevel Identity Perspective," 255.

24. Pfeffer, "Building Sustainable Organizations: The Human Factor," 35.
25. Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 14.
26. Mountz et al., "For Slow Scholarship."

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