Editor's Column: The Emotional Experiences of Librarians

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A colleague of mine, Lindsey Reno at the University of New Orleans, asked me several months ago if I wanted to co-author a book chapter with her about the emotional experiences of librarians with regard to weeding. If you are a faithful reader of my editor's column (or a friend on Facebook) you'll know that I've had QUITE the emotional experience with a large-scale deselection project at my library over the last two years. So needless to say I said yes, eager to learn about the emotional experiences of other librarians related to weeding.

I don't want to reveal too much about the book chapter since it's still in press at the time of this writing. But as we started working on our respective parts of the literature review, we had the same experience: there's not a lot in the literature about the emotional experiences of librarians going through weeding projects. There's a lot to be said about how to effectively conduct a deselection project – how to develop criteria, manage space and staff, deal with faculty or community reaction to such a project (that is to say, dealing with OTHER people's emotions), how to dispose of weeded materials, and how deselection is still a necessary and important facet of collection development. There's research out there on library/classroom faculty relations with regard to such projects. There's also a lot to be said about the stress of librarianship and how to mindfully manage it (easier said than done). But as far as qualitative research on the emotional experiences of librarians in the course of deselection – much less anything else – the literature seems lacking.

That's not to say it's not there. In her eye-catchingly titled article "Killing Sir Walter Scott: A Philosophical Exploration of Weeding" Laura Raphael (2013), writing for *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, attempts to explore "those horrible feelings" associated with the weeding process (p. 1). Though she calls it a 'philosophical exploration' it really appears to be more of a psychological and emotional exploration, bringing in notions of identity, meaning, possibility, responsibility, and security and the role that print books play in the evocation or provocation of those experiences. Raphael (2013) acknowledges that the literature is lacking in research and explanations regarding the emotional experience of deselection. She explains this lack of emotional exploration by way of two notions. First, emotion is a subjective experience and, being rather "messy" doesn't lend itself "to charts and numbers and the siren call of 'objective' truth" (Raphael, 2013, p. 4). Second, librarians tend to be "thinkers, not feelers! We work from our frontal lobes, thank you very much," regarding ourselves as "clearheaded, dispassionate professionals who use logic and statistics to evaluate our collections and determine the best material for users" (Raphael, 2013, p. 4). Raphael (2013) acknowledges that librarians are "not unfeeling automatons; we can think *and* feel and do our jobs well, and weeding is both intellectual and emotional" (p. 4).

The argument could be made that much of what librarians do is both intellectual and emotional. Of course, the accrual and assessment of database usage statistics is not emotional, nor is the process of cataloging a book necessarily an emotional experience. But given that most librarianship features elements of customer service and contact with users, it most certainly involves emotional experiences, positive and negative. Chen Su-May Sheih (2012) conducted a survey of circulation librarians experiences with difficult patrons, performing what Sheih refers to as *emotional labor*. Sheih (2012) defines emotional labor as "good service manners,"

including "etiquettes, smiles and other explicit service manners," which often require librarians to "conceal their emotions in most situations to look amiable to patrons," making librarianship a profession "that demands high emotional labor" (p. 5). Consequently, librarians become vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. In other professions, such as nursing, emotional exhaustion can become a catalyst for burnout (a topic which I have written about before in this column). Burnout contributes to job dissatisfaction, workforce turnover, and a host of physical ailments.

Given that working in a library tends to be a customer service-oriented profession in general, whether one is discussing librarians or staff, the fact remains that interacting with other human beings (especially human beings one is trying to help) can sometimes turn into a very emotionally taxing experience. This evokes the idea – as Sheih (2012) suggested with 'difficult patron service' – of the problem patron, reminding me of Mark Willis' well-known title *Dealing with Difficult People in the Library*, which I recall reading while in graduate school. I'd say that most librarians who read it consider it highly recommended reading for anybody considering working in a library. It focuses on issues of communication (particularly improving communication and offering communication strategies), identifying solutions for handling problems with patrons, and solutions for preventing problems, such as developing strong policies.

These are all important points to bear in mind when dealing with patrons, difficult or not. But what I return to again and again is the absence of a focus on how these experiences (and others) emotionally affect librarians and library staff. Furthermore, sometimes it's not the patrons who cause problems, but one's own colleagues and coworkers, unintentionally or maliciously. In the academic setting we discuss such issues in terms of collegiality (Scanlon, 2016). Of course, one can safely assume that negative experiences negatively impact library staff and faculty, and

that positive experiences positively impact library staff and faculty. How library policies and projects affect stakeholders is often considered, especially in light of changes to collections and policies (Murphy, 2013). But aren't librarians and library staff stakeholders as well? Where is the consideration for their feelings and experiences in light of such changes?

Back in 2015, in volume 3, issue 3, I wrote a column entitled "The Cult of the Book and the Demonizing of Librarians" which discussed the historical enmity that exists between library faculty and teaching faculty as a framework for my personal experiences in the course of the large-scale deselection project (which is still going on as of the writing of this column). At the end of the column I solicited the readership:

> I'd like for you – the folks out there, whether library faculty, staff, or library students – to email me at lowe@ulm.edu and clue me into your solutions or ideas about how to reach out to faculty and help them understand what we do. These can be ideas or strategies you've used or tested; they can be things you've read in the literature that you think have sincere merit; or they can be things you think might work theoretically. Email me these ideas and this time next year, I will publish them, giving you credit for your contributions.

I only had one response, from Margaret Keller of Northshore Technical Community College (NTCC). She wrote:

> From my standpoint, as a Library Director at a small community college library system, with two staff members (including myself) and 3+ locations, I have found it difficult to personally reach out to faculty at all, but we are trying to do so by offering to provide information about their specific discipline on our library website (LibGuides generated). (M. Keller, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

I'm rather disappointed that I only received one response, but it got me wondering: I know the readership of *Codex* is rather small, but could the lack of responses also reflect the profession's struggle to make meaningful, productive contact with teaching faculty? The literature is full of articles on the importance of collaboration and communication with the faculty, not to mention detailing communication and outreach strategies. Are these strategies truly effective? Or are the experiences of librarians in Louisiana unique – do we not collaborate or reach out as much because of budgetary woes and overwork, much like our teaching counterparts? Or are my experiences at my own university the exception rather than the rule?

The solutions to these problems seem straightforward: make contact. Reach out. Libraries and universities at large need more money if they are to accomplish their goals and missions to support learning and research. Employ regular and meaningful contact and outreach. But despite the straightforward nature of these solutions, they are more easily said than done. But they need to be done. The work is hard, sure, and it will be emotionally draining. It seems to me that as emotionally involved as librarians are, given the service-oriented nature of the job, that more research on their emotional experiences would be done. But perhaps we fear losing the respect and status we have acquired as impartial and skilled managers of information.

At the end of the day, however, we cannot ignore our emotions or those of our constituents. Information-seeking behavior is fraught with emotion; information itself can likewise be fraught or tinged with information. I think Ina Fourie and Heidi Julien's (2014) call to "ending the dance" of avoiding studies of affect and emotion in studies of information science behavior is a critical one. But I think it should be extended: studies of librarianship and library staff should also stop dancing around those issues and delve deep into them to understand how they affect and influence the experiences and performances of library faculty and staff. Nursing

regards itself as a reflective profession and acknowledges how an individual's beliefs, values, and possible prejudices can influence their ability to provide quality care; nursing values reflection in professional practice as a means of understanding how one's own experiences inform and influence one's practice and using that understanding to improve and enhance performance. Perhaps it's time that librarianship adopted that approach as well.

References

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