

The Emotional Dimensions of Deselection: An Annotated Bibliography

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Abstract

The purpose of this annotated bibliography is to highlight the limited literature available regarding the emotional dimensions of deselection on the part of librarians. Though there is a vast body of research regarding deselection, much of the literature focuses on practical strategies for planning and carrying out deselection projects, reflecting mostly on how stakeholders beyond the library – patrons, faculty, the public, etc. – are affected by such projects, there is little research on how such projects emotionally impact the librarians carrying them out. This bibliography highlights and analyzes literature which does in some way, however small, acknowledge that facet of the practice. The author raises questions regarding the emotional dimensions of deselection as it relates to librarianship, wondering why this aspect of the practice has not been more studied, given its controversial nature and increasing necessity as electronic resources become more preferred, and the physical face of libraries change in response.

Keywords: librarianship; emotion; deselection



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Rationale for the Bibliography

They say that death and taxes are certain, and without a doubt this is true. Yet this lovely little aphorism fails to take into account another certainty of life: change. Survival often requires change, either through the slow morphing and adjusting affected by evolution or through the swifter and more immediate decisions to change course, career, partners, etc. – whatever threatens one’s survival in a temporal, immediate, or figurative sense. Without getting too much deeper into the nature of life, suffice it to say that change comes to all things, and survival depends on an organism’s ability to modify and adapt to the challenges it faces.

Libraries are no different. Many librarians would argue that libraries are ‘living’ organisms that respond and transform to their environments, where *environments* refer to social conditions, patron needs, and a variety of other factors that seem to have always been part of what shapes and makes libraries what they are. Libraries are certainly dynamic entities that must respond to those factors in order to follow their missions and visions and react to the needs of their users. Change in libraries can take many forms: changing formats and access to materials and collections; technologies (always a big one); addressing social needs and issues; and physical arrangements of collections and spaces.

This last one, changing physical arrangements of collections and spaces, has become closely connected with changing technologies. The increasing affordability and availability of mobile technologies has made electronic resources much more attractive, not to mention convenient. As the emphasis on enhancing electronic collections increases, the reduction of print collections also increases. Consequently, the practice of deselection comes to the foreground. Deselection can be, to put it mildly, a contentious and emotional process for everybody involved,

librarians and stakeholders alike. However, the literature usually refers to the emotional dimensions of the experience in reference to stakeholders such as faculty members or concerned members of the community. When the emotional dimensions of the experience are referenced with regard to librarians or library staff, the mentions are often perfunctory. Given how closely library faculty and staff work with both the collections and with the public, it seems strange that the emotional experiences of library faculty and staff are not mentioned more or studied more closely. Working in libraries can be an emotionally dense experience, given that information-seeking behavior and interactions with the public can be emotionally weighty experiences (Fourie & Julien, 2014). Furthermore, emotional labor can lead to emotional exhaustion which can in turn contribute to stress and burnout (Chen, 2012), leading to turnover in library faculty and staff (Christian, 2015).

Currently, the author has both a book chapter in the process of being published (co-authored) and a full-length book in process (co-authored) regarding the emotional dimensions of librarianship. The book chapter features a qualitative study conducted by the authors that focuses on the emotional dimensions of deselection for librarians and library staff, while the book examines the phenomenon more broadly in librarianship. In the research for both of those projects, it became readily apparent that there is limited research on these issues. One of the elements which emerged from the literature is that there seems to be a reluctance to speak about the emotional side of deselection projects on the part of librarians, and the literature itself seems reluctant to inquire about that facet of the practice. This raises questions about the willingness of the profession to admit its feelings or reflect on their personal experiences regarding this aspect of the job. It makes one wonder about other aspects of the job about which librarians would be reluctant to reflect. For the time being, it seems prudent to highlight the limited research that

does exist on the issue of the emotional dimensions of deselection.

Target Audience

The target audience for this annotated bibliography is any librarian who participates in deselection. It may be particularly useful for collection development librarians and liaison librarians in academic settings who participate in deselection projects. It may also be useful for librarians in other settings where deselection is undertaken and perhaps contentious.

Materials Selection

The resources utilized in this bibliography were identified through databases and Google Scholar. They were identified in the course of research for the aforementioned research-based publications. Keywords such as *deselection*, *emotional dimensions*, *emotions*, *weeding*, and *burnout* were used to identify resources.

References

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Raphael, L. (2013). Killing Sir Walter Scott: A philosophical exploration of weeding. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 1-10.

Vnuk, R. (2015). Weeding gone wrong. *The weeding handbook: A shelf-by-shelf guide*. American Library Association.



Annotated Bibliography

Allen, M. (2015). Weed'em and reap: The art of weeding to avoid criticism. *Library Media Connection*, 28(6), 32-33.

Author Melissa Allen discusses the necessity of deselection, how to initiate a deselection project, and how to deal with titles selected for discard. Allen writes from a school media center perspective but her arguments regarding how technology has changed the face of libraries apply across the board. She discusses how many media specialists feel the need to weed at night or other slow times to avoid criticism of such projects since many patrons do not understand the necessity or importance of deselection to keep it useful and relevant. Allen highlights the controversy which often surrounds deselection and discusses how to address criticism related to deselection. While the author highlights the feelings of patrons about deselection she does not address the feelings of librarians, except the desire to avoid criticism. This article highlights how the feelings of librarians in the deselection process within the larger literature are often neglected and focus on avoidance or mitigation.

Berry III, J. N. (2013). The weeding war. *Library Journal*, 138(18), 10-10.

Like others before him, author John Berry III notes the deeply controversial nature of deselection. Like Allen, he endorses the practice but suggests that the terms *deselection* and

weeding are counterproductive to getting patrons on board with the practice. He suggests identifying another way of referring to the practice but offers few alternatives. Again, like Allen, Berry focuses on the feelings of patrons about the process without acknowledging how the process may affect librarians. He echoes Allen's recommendation about weeding under the cover of night – again, an avoidance technique. This does little to address the emotional dimensions of the practice, which seems strange; given how exposed librarians are to the ire of patrons who oppose the practice, it seems that there would be a toll. But this toll is not addressed in Berry's work at all, except in the form of an avoidance strategy.

Chen, S.S. (2012). A survey of circulation librarians' emotional labor and emotional exhaustion: The case of difficult patron service in university libraries. *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences*, 50(1), 5-39.

doi:10.6120/JoEMLS.2012.501/0482.RS.AM

This resource was, in the course of research for the emotional dimensions of deselection, the only resource which specifically addressed the notions of emotional labor and emotional exhaustion without librarianship. Unfortunately, this article does not focus on deselection. However, it does look at a group of front-line librarians who would be likely to experience patrons' ire in the face of deselection projects. The librarians in Chen's study reported high emotional labor but low emotional exhaustion, rarely encountering problems with difficult patrons. It is worth mentioning that Chen's study was conducted in Taiwan, so generalizing the results may be difficult, especially given the narrow focus of the study (circulation librarians). Nevertheless, Chen's study highlights the fact that librarianship is a high emotional labor profession.

Christian, L. A. (2015). A passion deficit: Occupational burnout and the new librarian: A

recommendation report. *Southeastern Librarian*, 62(4), 2-11.

Christian tackles the issue of occupational burnout in new librarians, though the report undoubtedly contains elements of librarianship in general that would challenge even the most weathered and established late-career librarian. The author specifically discusses the issue of emotional labor and its relationship to burnout. Christian underlines, as did Chen, that librarianship contains many aspects which make it an emotionally demanding profession, outlining those aspects using the LIS literature. The thrust of the report is to make recommendations for addressing the issue, with Christian identifying four tasks which should be undertaken to reduce the issue of burnout in librarianship. These involve critiquing the literature and making recommendations for areas of research. This report provides a great deal of insight into the emotional labor of librarianship, how it impacts librarians, and how the problem may be rectified from within the profession, using constructive recommendations.

Dubicki, E. (2008). Weeding: Facing the fears. *Collection Building*, 27(4), 132–135.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/01604950810913689>

The title of her article suggests that author Eleonora Dubicki acknowledges that “annoyance” and “avoidance” are not the only emotions librarians may experience in the course of a deselection project; they may also experience fear which can take its own toll. Dubicki specifically identifies the purpose of her study as being the identification of an approach to deselection which should mitigate librarians’ fears and concerns. Dubicki focuses on academic libraries and uses a case study approach. While a majority of the paper provides a template for implementing a deselection project (of which there is no lack in the literature), it also focuses on enhancing librarian confidence in the deselection process (lack of confidence being cited as a significant barrier to librarian performance in deselection projects). Though it only addresses a

limited range of emotions in the process, Dubicki's work nevertheless examines emotional dimensions of deselection on the part of librarianship.

Fourie, I., & Julien, H. (2014). Ending the dance: A research agenda for affect and emotion in studies of information behaviour. *Information Research*, 19(4), 108-124. Retrieved from <http://www.informationr.net/ir/19-4/isic/isic09.html#.WHZztX0Rqew>

Though it does not focus exclusively on librarianship or deselection, the work of Fourie and Julien underscores the need for research on affect and emotion in information research. The authors assert that such focus is needed in order to assure “a systematic and holistic approach to information behaviour scholarship” (Fourie & Julien, 2014). Given the dearth of research in the LIS literature on the emotional dimensions, labor, or exhaustion in librarianship, this certainly seems to be a timely piece of research. The purpose of the authors' article is outline a research agenda for addressing gaps in the information behavior scholarship as well as identifying those gaps in the literature and determining what, if anything, has been done, but it could also serve as a foundation for addressing similar gaps in the LIS literature pertaining to librarianship, including the specific activity of deselection.

Lee, M. (2009). Weeding is not just for gardeners: A case study on weeding a reference collection. *Community & Junior College Libraries*, 15(3), 129-135.

doi:10.1080/02763910902979460

Marta Lee, in the vein of many others in the literature, provides a case study on a deselection project within her library, specifically the reference collection. She discusses – as do many in the literature – the necessity of deselection and the influence that the digital age has exerted on print collections. Though the majority of the article focuses on the case study from Lee's library, examining the hows and wherefores of the process, the author does acknowledge

the experience of librarians, albeit briefly. Lee describes deselection from the librarians' perspectives as a time-consuming, labor-intensive, thankless, potentially neverending, discouraging, dusty, and frustrating. Though she does not delve much deeper than that in terms of librarians' experiences, this acknowledgement underlines the fact that the people responsible for the actual deselection of titles are not emotionless automatons who perform without being affected in their duties. Unfortunately, Lee's article, like many in the literature, focuses more on the logistics of deselection; there seems to be no shortage of such articles in the literature.

Mastel, K., & Innes, G. (2013). Insights and practical tips on practicing mindful librarianship to manage stress. *LIBRES: Library & Information Science Research Electronic Journal*, 23(1), 1-8.

Though not specifically about deselection, Kristen Mastel and Genevieve Innes discuss how multifaceted and multidimensional (read: stressful) librarianship can be and how to apply mindfulness to one's professional practice to manage stress. The thrust of the article is how to integrate mindfulness into one's daily professional practice and how it can be used to improve that practice. The value of this article in this bibliography is the way in which it acknowledges how multifaceted librarianship is and how it can impact one physiologically and psychologically which can, in turn, negatively affect one's daily behaviors. The article does not explicitly address the emotional dimensions of librarianship or deselection, but it highlights the fact that the job itself – and by extension deselection – can be fraught. Furthermore, it offers strategies for helping librarians manage their on-the-job stress.

McMullen, A. (2013). One man's trash. *The Bottom Line*, 26(4), 132-134.

McMullen frames his discussion of deselection in a nice little story about pulling a book from the shelves for discard only for a student patron to ask for the book, needing to use it. As a

result, McMullen reversed his decision to withdraw the book. While this is a nice story, it does not accomplish much in the way of revealing anything new about the deselection process.

Unfortunately, while the article is presented by *The Bottom Line* like a research article, with a purpose, design, findings, and value, it is ultimately little more than the equivalent of an opinion piece. The ‘findings’ for the article listed in the abstract assert that “aside from the functional aspects” associated with weeding “there are emotional aspects to discarding that can be overwhelming for some” (McMullen, 2013, p. 132). However, there is next to no mention in the text proper of said “emotional aspects.” The closest the article comes to acknowledging the emotional dimensions of deselecting is to assert that the increase in electronic resources are undoubtedly painful “to personality types accustomed to collecting as opposed to discarding” (McMullen, 2013, p. 133). This reveals very little about the actual emotional experiences of librarians and seems solely based on McMullen’s perception of the process.

Perry, K. (2008). Ode to a Weeding Experience. *Library Media Connection*, 26(5), 40–40.

Though not a research study or even an opinion piece Karen Perry’s poem “Ode to a Weeding Experience” is worth including in this bibliography given its wonderful description of the weeding process. It includes the physical aspects – “your hands are nasty from the / dust and grit and all those microscopic bugs. / You sneeze” – as well as those having to do with patrons or the public – “You cringe. You obfuscate, prevaricate, and downright lie to avoid the unavoidable” (Perry, 2008, p. 40). But most importantly to this bibliography, it addresses those emotional aspects of discarding books, noting that the moment a book is put in the dumpster or recycle bin “is a bittersweet final moment. / ‘Adieu, sweet books”” (Perry, 2008, p. 40). Perry (2008) describes regret “for those books that never found their readers,” a feeling which impacts her because that is her job, “to help each book find its reader” (p. 40). This suggests that Perry

regards the deselection of underutilized books as a kind of failure on her part as a librarian, even concluding the poem with the statement that she “must not fail those” books she has kept (Perry, 2008, p. 40). In a simple, one-page poem, Perry gets at the heart of some of the emotional aspects of deselection, even while addressing all the other, well-known aspects of the process.

Raphael, L. (2013). Killing Sir Walter Scott: A philosophical exploration of weeding. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 1-10.

In this attention-grabbing exploration of the topic of weeding Laura Raphael delves into the complexity of the practice, emphasizing that it likely a far more controversial and complex practice than library professionals and the library literature reveal. While she acknowledges that the practice is both intellectual and physical, she highlights that it is a profoundly emotional one featuring psychological, cultural, and even metaphysical dimensions. Raphael identifies and details six (6) reasons which explore and are meant to explain the emotional, psychoanalytical, metaphysical, and anthropological reasons deselection is difficult for librarians. In essence, Raphael does what much of the literature fails to do: attempt to explore the emotional dimensions of deselection and explain why deselection can be a difficult process for librarians quite apart from the well-known and well-established reasons repetitively detailed in the library literature.

Vnuk, R. (2015). Weeding gone wrong. *The weeding handbook: A shelf-by-shelf guide*. American Library Association.

Rebecca Vnuk (2015) has created a very useful resource in her *The Weeding Handbook*, offering a variety of practice strategies, resources, and tools for conducting deselection projects. However, of particular interest to this bibliography is the chapter entitled “Weeding Gone Wrong” in which Vnuk (2015) discusses the “dark side” of deselection projects (p. 70). A large

part of the chapter discusses the challenges and problems library professionals can and will face in the course of deselection projects, offering anecdotes from librarians and discussing critical strategies such as communicating with patrons. In this sense, Vnuk's chapter on the 'dark side' of deselection is not that much different from the bulk of the literature which discusses deselection. Towards the end of the chapter – after the obligatory list of good criteria for deselecting materials – Vnuk (2015) acknowledges that “there is emotion involved” in the process (p. 73). But as one reads the anecdotes, which Vnuk (2015) refers to as ‘Tales from the Front’ and which were drawn from a “Weeding Tips” article on Booklist Online, it becomes clear that these ‘horror stories’ have more to do with a lack of proper deselection in libraries rather than negative experiences of librarians. This application of the term ‘horror story’ focuses on the process and the collections, not to mention the experiences of the patrons, but with the exception of one story in which the storyteller comments that they “think we did a fairly good job” (Vnuk, 2015, p. 76), there is little reflection on the emotional experiences of the librarians involved, even on the part of the librarians themselves.