Recalibrating Librarians' Service Ethic in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Towards a Mutually Empowering Framework

Laila Brown

Hawaii Pacific University Libraries, USA

Abstract: Though the service ethic resonates deeply with many in librarianship, the COVID-19 pandemic—and the accompanying mandate of some library governing bodies that library buildings stay open and staff report to work on site—has underlined a need to critically reassess it. In interrogating current conceptualizations of librarianships' service ethic, I aim to problematize the association of service with subservience, challenge societal assumptions about women's outsized role in the domain of caring, and reaffirm a feminist approach to service work as central to librarianship. I employs a feminist framework to shift the focus of service from hierarchical relationships to mutually empowering relationships. This reframing has the potential to make progress towards enhanced appreciation of libraries 'and librarians 'worth to society, and by extension, that of all service oriented, women-intensive professions.

1. Introduction

Libraries and library staff are chronically undervalued and underfunded in the United States in relation to the benefits they confer upon their communities, yet engage in the important work of fostering an information literate society and acting as vital safety net institutions for our most vulnerable populations. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated this paradox, observed in select library governing bodies' mandates—most prevalent at the beginning of the pandemic—that their library buildings remain open and staffed in service to the public, despite risks this posed to library staff, and in defiance of guidance from public health officials[1] and the American Library Association (ALA). On March 17, 2020, the ALA Executive Board released a statement recommending that all libraries close to the public:

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[1] The Center for Disease Control recommended that workplaces encourage staff to telework when feasible, when the level of community transmission or impact of COVID-19 is even "minimal to moderate" (2020:6).

> The ALA Executive Board unequivocally stands in support of the safety and well-being of library workers and the communities we serve. To protect library workers and their communities from exposure to COVID-19 in these unprecedented times, we strongly recommend that academic, public and school library leaders and their trustees and governing bodies evaluate closing libraries to the public and only reopening when guidance from public health officials indicates the risk from COVID-19 has significantly subsided.

While many libraries did quickly take strong measures to protect the health and safety of their staff and patron communities, others have had an arguably lacking response. In their reluctance to close libraries during the pandemic, select library administrations have at once asserted the inherent worth of libraries and the role they play in society, while simultaneously issuing a *de facto* call for librarians 'service ethic to override prioritization of their own health and safety; a mandate I argue would be thrust much less aggressively towards a male-dominated profession.

This paper advocates that libraries are vital to the wellbeing of communities, and thus should be valued as such during times of normalcy; and in times of crisis, the governing bodies of libraries ought to affirm the worth of libraries by taking serious and concrete measures to ensure the health and safety of the staff who make their existence possible. I argue that a mischaracterization within librarianship of *service* as *subservience* positions librarians as altruistic to the point of self-effacement. This mischaracterization has enabled library governing bodies to place the undue burden upon their employees of requiring them to report to work on site even in the midst of a pandemic.

I problematize librarianship's service ethic through a feminist perspective by first exploring the implications of decisions to either keep libraries open during or reopen them in the midst of the pandemic. I then examine librarianship's ethos of service, situate it within the women-intensive demographic of the profession, and finally, attempt to extricate it from a patriarchal framework and reassert it within a feminist one. A feminist conception of the service ethic has the potential to make librarians more effective at empowering our communities, and reciprocally make progress towards enhanced appreciation of libraries ' worth to society.

2. The question of library closure (and reopening) during COVID-19

I will note that at the time of this writing in early May 2020, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While rates of infection vary greatly by geographic area, the pervasive uncertainties of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (in terms of what factors put individuals at higher risk for serious or critical infection; what the disease's mortality rate is; how to best protect ourselves from infection or

mitigate symptoms; whether our healthcare systems can accommodate the additional demand the disease places on it; and what long term health consequences or potential complications of infection are, etc.) require that we exercise extreme caution. In a short time, it may appear perfectly safe to resume life as was normal prior to the pandemic. But in this moment, there are too many unknowns to reasonably feel confident that we are individually or collectively safe; too many, anyway, to ask that library staff potentially endanger themselves by reporting to physical work locations (shared spaces that often prohibit social distancing) and interact with library materials (that can act as vectors of disease transmission (Ewen, 2020)).

While local governments have enacted sweeping social distancing policies and even stay-at-home/work-from-home orders, throughout the pandemic thus far, we have observed select library administrations mandate that their library buildings remain open and their staff report to work on site. As of March 23, 2020, certain public and academic libraries had remained open and continued to serve patrons in person (Ford, 2020). Casey Manno, a library associate at Sacramento Public Library in California, created a shareable spreadsheet (available at https://bit.ly/2SFuk56) that invited library workers to post information regarding their library's response to the pandemic, including whether their library buildings were open or closed, whether library staff were currently working and in what capacity, and whether and how library staff were being compensated if not able to report to work (Ford, 2020). The data show a variety of responses: many participants reported that their libraries were entirely closed, while some reported their buildings were closed to public but open to staff, who were required to report to work in-person, and others reported that buildings remained open to both staff and patrons. Manno hoped that this data would encourage more libraries to close and support remote work for their staff by demonstrating to library administrations that they were in the minority among libraries if they were remaining open, requiring staff to work on site, or requiring staff to use sick or vacation time if not able or willing to work on site (Ford, 2020).

In fact, a survey of 777 United States public libraries found that only 4% were not planning on closing as of March 23, 2020 (Riley, 2020). Despite planned closures, however, the survey showed that only a small minority of library staff would be able to work exclusively remotely (Riley, 2020). In analysis of the results collected within the first 48 hours of a survey focused on United States academic libraries 'responses to COVID-19, disseminated March 11, 2020, Hinchcliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) found that approximately three-quarters of libraries reported reducing their hours, with only 8% closing entirely. Additionally, 68% of libraries were allowing remote work for at least some employees, though only 2% had mandated remote work, meaning, according to Hinchcliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg, that "even when libraries have closed, employees are likely still working onsite." These data provide a snapshot of the scrambled response of library administrations to the pandemic. Among some

libraries that had temporarily closed, we are already beginning to observe a grappling with questions of when and how to reopen (Balzer, 2020).

On the one hand, the refusal to close or the decision to reopen libraries as the pandemic continues to rage support the notion that libraries are essential to their communities—a case librarians tirelessly work to advance. Some LIS professionals have expressed the view that the possibility of temporarily closing libraries presents an existential threat to libraries. Royce Kitts, Director of Liberal Memorial Library in Liberal, Kansas, summarized this sentiment: "I think part of our collective fear at this moment is local governments thinking that because we closed that we aren't really that important" (2020). As Kitts suggests, this thinking is understandable, given the real difficulties libraries face in terms of flat or diminishing budgets (Bosche, Albee, & Romaine, 2020). Yet it is problematic in that it works within, rather than against, the dominant ideology that the onus is on libraries to justify their worth in quantitative means rather than to receive due support as both societal equalizers and safety nets, the benefits of which are often difficult or impossible to quantify. On the other hand, the refusal to close or the decision to reopen libraries at this moment in the pandemic counteract the idea that the library workforce is essential: jeopardizing the health and safety of the library staff by requiring them to work on site actually positions them as expendable, as it tacitly endorses the message that risking their health and safety in exchange for keeping a building open is acceptable.

The insistence on keeping buildings open and requiring employees to work on site places employees in a difficult position in which their ability to advocate for themselves is neutralized by fear that they may be ostracized at work or fired from their positions. Many library workers who have, in interviews, dissented to perceived insufficiencies in library governing bodies' responses to keep staff safe during the pandemic fear retaliation and have asked not to be identified by name (e.g. Cohen & Jaffe, 2020; Flaherty, 2020). Library workers should not have to endanger their livelihoods in order to avoid engendering their lives, or vice versa. Instead, the value of library workers should be recognized *so that* they do not have to unnecessarily experience danger. As Kitts stated:

> I will not reopen the library until I can ensure the health and safety of our staff. I will not reopen the library just because the governor cancels the stay at home order. We will be slow and deliberate, because for the first time in my 20 years of being a librarian, the decisions I make mean the life or death of my employees. (Yes. I said that last part. A bit of hyperbole, but honestly, not that much.) Safety will be the top priority.

Kitts also aptly illuminates how hierarchies of power within the library have the potential to place some workers within the library at higher risk than others. In his open letter to library directors, he contends:

> If your plan is to begin reopening as soon as possible, or engaging in curbside [lending] soon, then I want to see the library director and administrators on the front lines of service…Our lower-paid employees are often our most vulnerable in terms of being able to handle sickness and unplanned financial setbacks. Is your desire to reopen worth that risk? Are you certain that giving into pressures (both real and imagined) to reopen, versus your duty to protect the health and safety of your employees, will be in the long term best interest of the library?

Why among some libraries, we may wonder, is safety—of library workers and the patrons whom libraries have purportedly remained open for—not the top priority?

3. The ethos of service (and its misconstruction) in librarianship

Libraries have the potential to act as great equalizers in providing space, information, skills, and affirmation to their communities, and it is this characteristic of the institution of the library that surely draws humanitarian-minded individuals to the profession. Many librarians pride themselves on the advocacy they enact on behalf of their communities through actions of service. ALA espouses service as a "core value of librarianship" (American Library Association, 2006), and Gorman, echoing what one will find in virtually any introductory LIS text, asserts that "librarianship is a profession defined by service. Every aspect of librarianship, every action that we take as librarians can and should be measured in terms of service" (2000:75). The ethos of service befittingly manifests as a commitment to advancing human wellbeing through the provision of information and tools for patron communities. Because the extension of these provisions is concerned with affirming the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of patrons, care is central to the service ethic of librarianship, as I will discuss in more detail in a subsequent section.

Calls for libraries to either remain open or reopen amidst the pandemic advance the notion that librarians' commitment to service subsumes the other ethical principles the profession holds us to. While the first principle of the ALA Code of Ethics emphasizes a commitment to "the highest level of service," the fifth principle prescribes that we "advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions" (American Library Association, 2017). Calls for librarians to endanger our health and safety by reporting to on-site work locations while SARS-CoV-2 transmits virulently across the population posit these two ethics as mutually exclusive, and tellingly, prioritize the former principle over the latter.

The COVID-19 emergency has cast in sharp relief the widespread misinterpretation of librarianship's pledge to service, and the critical need to recalibrate our collective understanding of it, both within and outside of the profession. In the United States, a for-profit culture centered on customer

satisfaction (captured in the common maxim, "the customer is always right") abounds. This prioritization of customer satisfaction extends to the library world, where customers find their equivalent in patrons, and librarians may thus find that deference to patrons is a norm and an expectation, depending on the culture of the library they work within. In this way, libraries are conceived of and managed in a way that mirrors our capitalist economic system—one that is conducive to exploitation of workers. Indeed, Newmyer identified a "dual set of theories of librarianship, one humanitarian, the other essentially commercial, which have combined in an uneasy alliance and now dominate the philosophy and practices of library administrators" (1976:44). These competing theories remain extant, as libraries strive to prioritize their humanitarian work, yet must do so while struggling to remain financially viable in an environment of rapid changes and increasing demands (Schuitema, 2015; Herrera, 2016) coupled with static or decreasing budgets (Bosche, Albee, & Romaine, 2020), and, as a consequence of that, staffing that remains fixed or declines due to libraries' inability to refill positions as staff leave (Eden, 2015). Beyond navigating these incongruous ideologies, librarians, as members of a feminized profession, must further contend with persistent societal expectations to "exhibit unyielding patience, and to be subservient" (Bird, 2007) in addition to demonstrating docility, warmth, patience, and an enduring willingness to perform emotional labor. The contemporary misunderstanding of LIS's service ethic relies both on gender stereotyping and on the import of the commerce-based notion of employee subservience to the customer into the librarian-patron relationship. Indeed, in a discussion of service, Gorman stresses that "it is important to get away from the negative aspects and definitions of the word (it is unfortunate, in this respect, that 'service 'has cognates with such associations as 'servile 'and 'servant'" (2000:75).

4. Gendering of service work within and beyond LIS

Though the majority of librarians in the United States are women, not men, librarianship is women-intensive, rather than women-dominated: men are disproportionately represented in management positions and earn more than their women counterparts[2] (Mars, 2018). In their study of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) survey data, Galbraith, Merrill, and Outzen found a significant disparity in male and female librarian salaries, at both public and private institutions: female librarians were paid 1.3% less than their male counterparts in public ARL libraries, and 3.5% less in private ARL libraries (2018:79). In private ARL libraries, this equated to women making an average of US$2757.82 less than their male counterparts per year (Galbraith, Merrill, and Outzen, 2018:79). According to ALA-Allied Professional Association analysis of ARL survey data, even when controlling for years of experience, the pay disparity is greatest for women of color, who report lower than average salaries amongst all women and men of color (2014:27).

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[2] There is currently insufficient data on the job status and pay of gender nonbinary librarians.

Librarianship is not only women-intensive, but it is further a feminized profession. Hansen, Gracy, and Irvin link the feminization of librarianship to the tangible outcomes of "depressed salaries, limited professional advancement, and segregat[ion of] women into low-status, nonadministrative positions" (1999:312). Bird (2007) expounds upon the less tangible, yet equally real effects of feminization: "the roles of working women have been undervalued, as have the stereotypical values associated with femininity: patience, acquiescence, horizontal consensus (opposed to vertical hierarchies, which are associated with men), and the need for validation."

Like other pink collar professions such as nursing, social work, and teaching, librarianship is inextricably linked to the ideal of service. The association of pink collar professions with service work is not inherently problematic, but rather, it is the devaluation of service oriented, women-intensive work that deserves critical scrutiny. Bird (2007) states, "this devaluation of women and of the roles of women in the workforce is not due to socially constructed biological inadequacies in femininity; the devaluation of women is due to patriarchal ideologies."

The conception of service work as "women's work" is underscored in the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a *New York Times* analysis, one out of three jobs held by women has been designated as essential (Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020). This includes jobs in social work, health care, critical retail, and medical suppliers (Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020). Clearly, the disproportionate responsibility women have for service work extends far beyond librarianship. Furthermore, gender is not the only lens through which we must critically assess service work in the time of COVID-19: women of color are much more likely to hold an "essential" job than anyone else (Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020), and thus suffer increased risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 than those who are able to work from home and/or shelter-in-place.

The current patriarchal system is one in which many service workers—disproportionately women (and within that demographic, disproportionately women of color)—are at once the most essential and the least valued. When asked to discuss the terminology of economic "shutdown" resulting from COVID-19, Khara Jabola-Carolus, Executive Director of Hawai'i's Commission on the Status of Women stated, "There's the economy we see, and then there's all this other activity that co-exists and props it up—that's where women live…Normally this 'women's work' seems nonessential, but during covid-19, it's [society's] only defense from total collapse" (quoted in Nguyen, 2020). Jabola-Carolus may be referring more specifically to caregiving (such as domestic work, care for children, care for the elderly, etc.), but I argue that this assertion extends to librarianship as well. Libraries are inherently service oriented, but are, crucially, at the intersection of service and care: they provide tangible services to their communities, and this provision is motivated by an interest in individual and community wellbeing, or simply stated, in caring.

Libraries are institutions that extend care to even (or especially) the most disenfranchised among us. Crucially, libraries, similarly to other service oriented institutions, are financially undervalued during "normal" times, and yet have proven to be essential wellsprings of community resiliency during and after times of crisis (Vårheim, 2017). Librarians ought to strive to optimize this truth—especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic—in order to secure a lasting higher valuation of librarianship and by extension, of care oriented service work and women's labor in general.

5. Realigning service as a feminist concept

Service is—and should be—a cornerstone of librarianship. In interrogating the service ethic of librarianship, I aim not to challenge its essential place within the profession, but rather to challenge the current place that patriarchal modes of social organization have relegated it to. To do so, we must reassert care—and thus displace subservience—as the key mode of conducting relationships within librarianship's service ethic. In other words, we must center the service ethic as a feminist concept and assign greater value to it. Noddings (1984) proposed that the basis of moral action is founded upon caring for others and being cared for. According to Noddings, an ethic of care emphasizes interpersonal relationships rooted in receptivity and responsiveness. In her seminal work on feminist pedagogy in the realm of library instruction, Accardi locates caring as a feminist practice. In recounting her observations on the effect of an ethic of care in an instructional setting, she says:

> In my own classroom experience, it is evident to me that students respond well to caring. Just like any other vulnerable human being, they want to be the subject of care. They want to be cared about and cared for. And what makes care feminist is that it sees students as whole human beings, not vessels to be filled with information and knowledge. It sees learners as people with thoughts and feelings that they bring into the classroom, and which, in turn, affect how they learn...Taking the time to listen to students, to honor their voices, to rely on them for examples, and to encourage them to listen to each other all exemplify the ethic of care (2013:44).

Practicing a feminist mode of service, and thus care, in librarianship, involves acknowledging those we interact with holistically and equitably, and thus necessitates a shift in our conceptualization of service work away from power differentials that enable or encourage subservience in librarian-patron and library-community relationships.

In addition to eschewing power differentials in interpersonal relations, we must additionally focus the service ethic on the goal of empowerment, of ourselves and others. Acclaimed American feminist theorist bell hooks puts forth that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers

students" (1994:15). Similarly, librarians must be self-actualized, or at least be committed to working towards self-actualization if we hope to empower the communities we are dedicated to. Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh says "the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping profession should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people" (quoted in hooks, 1994:15). As such, if we are to be committed to advancing the wellbeing of others, we must also be committed to advancing the wellbeing of our selves. One participant in Riley's March 2020 survey on public libraries' responses to COVID-19 shared:

> Our staff's mental health is incredibly low at this time. Panic attacks are frequent. Our HR's policy won't allow us to use sick time just to 'avoid coming into work' and risk being exposed. We can use sick time if we do get COVID, and if we use up our sick time we go into 'negative hours 'that we'll work off at a later date. I've never felt less taken care of by an establishment.

Workers in such a position, who do not feel either cared for or empowered, cannot effectively care for or empower others. To empower others, we must ourselves be empowered. In the time of COVID-19, those with decision making power in libraries must demonstrate to their employees that they are cared for, so that employees, in turn, can enact the care so central to libraries' service mission for their communities.

Placing focus on wellbeing of others and ourselves within service work not only distances service work from notions of subservience, but it also functions to reclaim enhanced value for service work. Again, the extant patriarchal system is one in which many service workers—disproportionately women—are at once the most essential and the least valued. Problematizing the question of whether and when libraries close and then reopen during COVID-19 is one means by which librarians can actively participate in the disruption of this confounding status quo. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for librarians to assert ourselves as inherently valuable by advocating for our own health and safety in considerations of closing and reopening libraries. We further ought to use our relative position of power as skilled knowledge workers—with information and myriad means of communication at our fingertips—to include in our advocacy library assistants, technicians, and student workers, as well as our wider communities.

6. Conclusion

In this crisis time, library staff are, ironically, being asked to pick up the slack created by a system that has perpetually devalued the work of safety net institutions. The unique position libraries find themselves in during the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed indicative of societal problems broader than the undervaluing of libraries. The mental anguish that many librarians feel regarding the possibility or reality of closing libraries, and thus, pausing in-

person services to patrons, is no doubt in part a result of their knowledge that libraries can be incredibly important to the wellbeing of their communities, and serve, for many, as a place of last resort. In an email discussing the gradual reopening of libraries, sent to several library association listservs, Lucinda Nord, Executive Director of the Indiana Library Federation stressed that "some of our public libraries are the ONLY places to fax documents, apply for assistance, etc." (personal communication, May 1, 2020). Ideally one day we will move beyond extricating librarianship's service ethic from a commerce-based script and challenge why libraries are, in fact, one of the only means through which some individuals are able to access potentially life-saving assistance in the first place.

For myriad reasons, libraries in the United States find themselves in a difficult place in the time of COVID-19. Our understanding of both how libraries found themselves in this desperate circumstance, as well as how we may find our way out, might be best encapsulated in a brief discussion of freedom. By grounding service work in a feminist framework, libraries can actualize freedom as a "creative practice" (Weeks, 2011:22). This creative practice envisions freedom less as "freedom to" and more as a "freedom from": adherents to this ideal are not free in a liberal sense of the word—to do whatever they please—but in the feminist sense, which involves "not the absence of power but its democratization" (Weeks, 2011:23). COVID-19 necessitates this latter form of freedom; one in which we can collectively agree to practice social distancing and sheltering in place when possible, in order to aim to keep ourselves, and crucially, others, safe. A democratized freedom translates into guidelines collectively established and adhered to that extend care and protection to even the most vulnerable among us, during the time of COVID-19 and beyond.

In the midst of COVID-19, libraries' exercise of freedom as a creative practice would comprise many elements: providing for and empowering our patrons communities through creative virtual services; closing library buildings to reduce risk of SARS-Cov-2 transmission through shared space and shared materials; enabling staff to work from safety remotely; supporting staff through paid time off and continued medical benefits; practicing transparent and inclusive decision making regarding adjustments to library service; and aligning professed prioritization of the wellbeing of staff and patrons with concrete action. By reasserting our service ethic within an empowering feminist framework, librarians can advocate for a democratized freedom that protects everyone's rights to health and safety, thereby advocating for both ourselves and our communities, and elevating our impact and our worth in the eyes of the public.

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