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The Public Librarian Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study

L'expérience du faible moral chez le bibliothécaire public : une étude qualitative

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Article abstract

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The Public Librarian Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Recent studies on low morale in academic libraries reveal impacts on workplace health and organizational culture and concerns about leadership training and development. Additionally, established research on library dysfunction and emotional labour in librarianship, along with emerging scholarship on incivility in librarian-patron interactions, highlights a growing area of practice concerns for information professionals. This qualitative study centers public librarians' experience of low morale. Data validate the development and practice- and health-related outcomes of low morale and illuminate the realities of public library work, organizational culture and behaviours, impact of leadership practices, and perceptions of the value and role of librarians and the public library in North America.

Keywords

low morale, public librarians, public libraries, organizational behaviour, management, leadership

Introduction

Published literature shares concerns associated with the development of low morale as it is traditionally understood—including workload, participation in decision-making, and role conflict or ambiguity (Brun & Cooper, 2009). Particularly in the realm of business, discussions about how to reduce low morale in the workplace are plentiful; however, only recently has the concept been studied—in any industry—from the perspective of

lived experience. Kendrick's (2017) study and Kendrick and Damasco's (2019) study on low morale moved the concept from an abstract concern to a state of being, specifically revealing and addressing it as a phenomenon occurring in academic libraries in the United States and Canada. The studies offered rigorous documentation, summation, and validation of the phenomenon as an experience resulting from repeated and protracted exposure to emotional, verbal, written, and system abuse or neglect in the workplace. Moreover, these studies consistently connected burnout, workplace dysfunction, toxicity, and bullying to low morale and emphasized myriad negative mental health, physical health, practice, and career impacts on employees dealing with this experience. These works also shared impact factors affecting academic librarians in general and racial and ethnic minority academic librarians in particular working in college and university libraries in the United States and Canada. The current study builds on previous research and centers public librarians practicing in the United States and Canada in order to learn how low-morale experiences transpire for this group. This study's research questions are:

- How does low morale develop for librarians working in public libraries?
- What, if any, are the unique impact factors that influence low-morale experiences for this group?

This study provides continuing verification of the low-morale experience in libraries. Additionally, it reveals specificity of this phenomenon within the context of public librarianship. The study also reveals that during low-morale experiences, public librarians face additional negative emotional, physical, and cognitive impacts. Also, additional impact factors intensify the emotional, cognitive, and physiological outcomes of the low-morale phenomenon. Data confirm the path and outcomes of low morale, unearth the repercussions of this phenomenon, and bring into relief the real-world contexts of public librarians' daily work and workplace culture of United States and Canadian public libraries.

Literature Review

Until recently (Kendrick, 2017; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019), there was a significant gap in Library and Information Science (LIS) literature discussing librarian morale; however, discussions about related workplace and career concerns of dysfunction, burnout, and LIS employee well-being are increasing. Moreover, researchers are investigating the impact of user interactions on librarians' work. The immediacy of discussions on social media channels also underscores the need to acknowledge and document public librarians' low-morale experiences and its effects as this group moves through daily work and long-term practice.

Workplace Dysfunction

Defined broadly by Robinson (2008) as "ways [employees behave] that cause harm to others and to their organizations" (p. 141), dysfunctional workplace behaviour is being addressed in LIS literature. Henry, Eshleman, and Moniz's (2018) sweeping monograph

dives into numerous aspects of library dysfunction with chapters centering work environments, negative employee behaviours, workplace politics, conflict management, and more. In a related study, Henry, Eshleman, Croxton, and Moniz (2018) more deeply explored how incivility is linked to library dysfunction. Their study, which primarily reflects the responses of public librarians (61% of the respondent group), highlighted links to observed and experienced bullying, mobbing,¹ and employees' overall perceptions of their library workplaces as dysfunctional and subject to interpersonal workplace conflict.

Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Patron Interaction in Public Libraries

Studies of burnout in public libraries reveal experienced and observed workplace stressors that impact librarians' daily work-life. Such stressors often contradict the commonly held idea of the public library as an idyllic workplace that is quiet and free from distractions that hinder relaxing days of reading to one's content. Jordan's (2014) study of public librarians quantified the most popularly identified stressors for this group. At the top of the list were continuous work interruptions, difficulties with co-workers, numerous deadlines, budget concerns, and work overload. Not far behind were problems with management and lack of work recognition. International discussion of burnout in public librarians has also been consistent: Swedish researchers found definitive links between work exhaustion, cynicism, and "work situation[s] with too much to do, poor quality of social interactions, and value conflicts between the librarian and the organization" (Lindén et al., 2018, p. 202). Staffing concerns are often a flashpoint highlighting burnout and value conflicts between librarians and library leadership, and Hahn's (2019) discussion of job precarity (unsecured, unstable, temporary employment) as a point of collective trauma also reveals issues of mission creep in public libraries as employees are pressured to provide services that, until very recently, were perceived by the general public—and library leadership—as outside the scope of American library service provision (e.g., administering opioid overdose reversal medications).

Ancillary to mission creep is compassion fatigue (CF), a phenomenon that plagues members of many helping professions. Often cited in the nursing literature, CF engenders stress and worry for those who are suffering to the extent that it creates a "secondary traumatic stress" for the person who is offering the help (Figley, 1995). This phenomenon has been nominally addressed in LIS literature; Katopol's (2015) article on the topic briefly highlights that librarians are subject to CF due to stress from "dealing with difficult patrons," "having to do work for which they aren't qualified," and "staff cutbacks" (p. 2).

Research focusing on user incivility is emerging and currently centers international academic libraries. Vraimaki et al.'s (2019) study offers insight into problematic patron behaviours and their impacts on college librarians. Their study summarily revealed

¹ Mobbing is defined as "hostile and unethical communication directed in a systematic way, by one or more people toward another person or group, occurring often (almost daily) over a long period of time, generally at least six months" (Leymann, 1990, p. 120).

librarians' emotional responses to uncivil patron behaviour: "angry, irritated, nervous, disappointed, and downhearted" (p. 4), along with their behavioural responses: reduced enthusiasm, reduced work engagement, and observed instances of colleague's engagement in "revenge behaviors" (pp. 4–5). Public libraries are also documenting increases in negative patron interactions: in 2020, the Toronto Public Library reported increases of violence against librarians within an eight-year period, highlighting upticks in violent and abuse behaviours and threatening behaviours and verbal abuse (CBC News, 2020).

Vocational Awe and Resilience Narratives

Consistent investigation of low morale also reveals aspects of *vocational awe*, which Ettarh (2018) defined as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries are inherently good, sacred notions and therefore beyond critique." Within the realm of vocational awe, librarians may perceive librarianship as a calling (versus a job), invoke "purity tests" that "prove" someone is a "good" or "real" librarian, or subjugate their own health and interests in service of the profession or their organization as their jobs arbitrarily expand to include tasks that are not central to information query, discovery, procurement, provision, access, organization, or instruction, or other related support, and while no support is offered to adjust to such expansions. Ongoing low morale research and social media commentary also disclose aspects of resilience narratives. Berg, Galvan, and Tewell (Berg et al. 2018; Galvan et al., 2018) asserted that recent applications of the term *resilience* have been detrimental to library workplaces. They noted that calls for resilience hide fundamental organizational problems by shifting the blame for those problems to individual workers. They also noted that this shift places more burden on the most precariously positioned workers to keep libraries' core services in working order. Often, the most precariously positioned workers are members of traditionally marginalized groups, including women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Colloquially, resilience narratives are often couched in asking employees to "do more with less." Such outcomes often leave workers feeling inadequate and guilty for not being able to meet the challenges being asked of them, even if no resources are offered to assist.

Method

This study uses the qualitative research method of phenomenology, which aims to find and report meanings in a person or group's lived experience of an event or state of being. This methodology reveals and focuses aspects of a particular experience to a "description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Researchers' analysis of deep, prolific data is aided by processes that guard against judging the experience (called *epoche* or *bracketing*), or the context/world of the experience, as the phenomenon reveals itself (Moustakas, 1994). Bednall (2006) emphasized that these processes develop researchers' sense of empathy and facilitate recognition of a phenomenon's meaning. Low morale is the result of repeated and protracted exposure to emotional, verbal, written, and system abuse or neglect in the workplace (Kendrick,

2017); thus, the objective of this study is to understand if, how, and within what parameters this phenomenon presents itself in public libraries.

Sample

Participation invitations for this study were distributed to LIS listservs ACQNET-L, ALCS-L, ALCTS-PUBLIBTECHSERV-L, LIBIDAHO-L, LITA-L, NMRT-L, NEWYALSAMEMBERS-L, RUSA-L, SEFLIN, and the South Carolina State Library's SC Diversity and Inclusion Listserv. These groups were chosen because they include credentialed public librarians working in several specialties and who have varied years of experience. People who responded to the invitation were sent informed consent documents and invited for an interview. Participants were a purposive sample of public librarians (n=20) who:

- identified as credentialed (earning an American Library Association-accredited master's degree or its equivalent),
- were working or had worked in public libraries; and
- perceived they had experienced or were currently experiencing low morale.

Most of the group was female (85%), White (83%), between 36–45 years old (40%), and in their mid-careers (50%). Figures 1, 2, and 3 show detailed participant demographics.

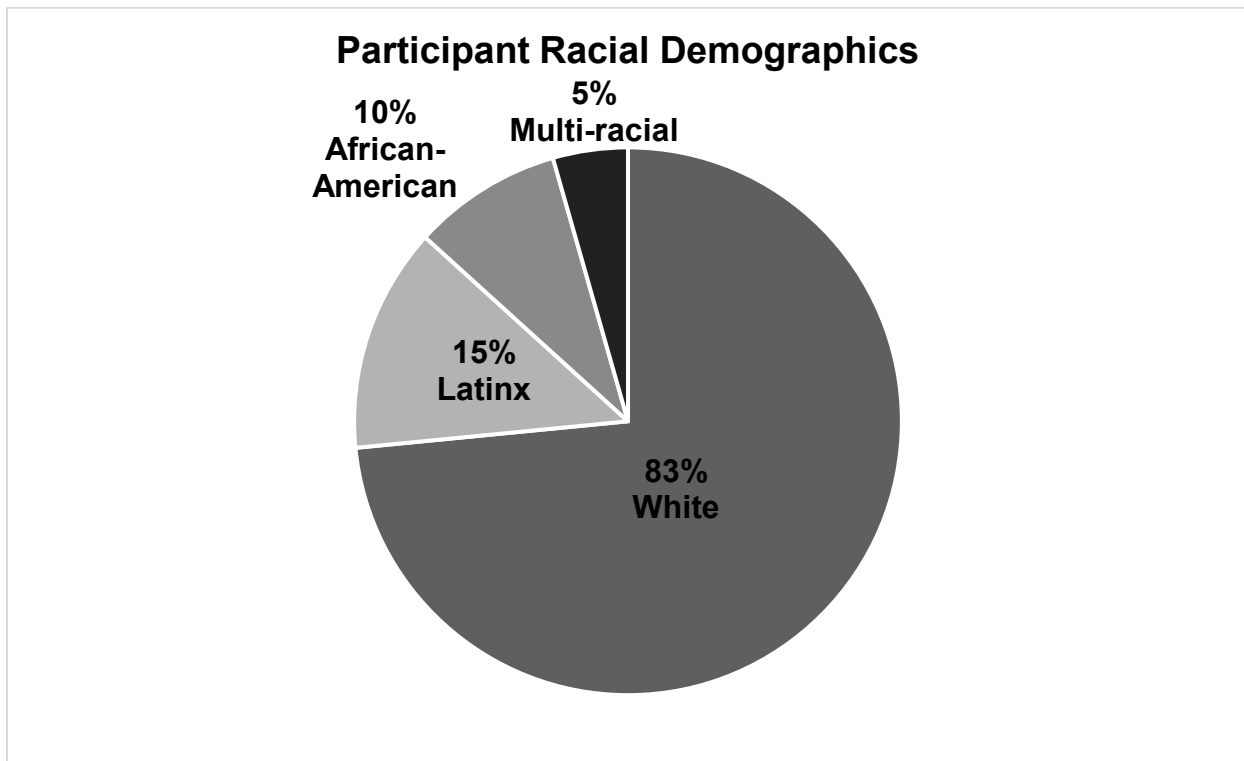


Figure 1. Racial demographics of study participants.

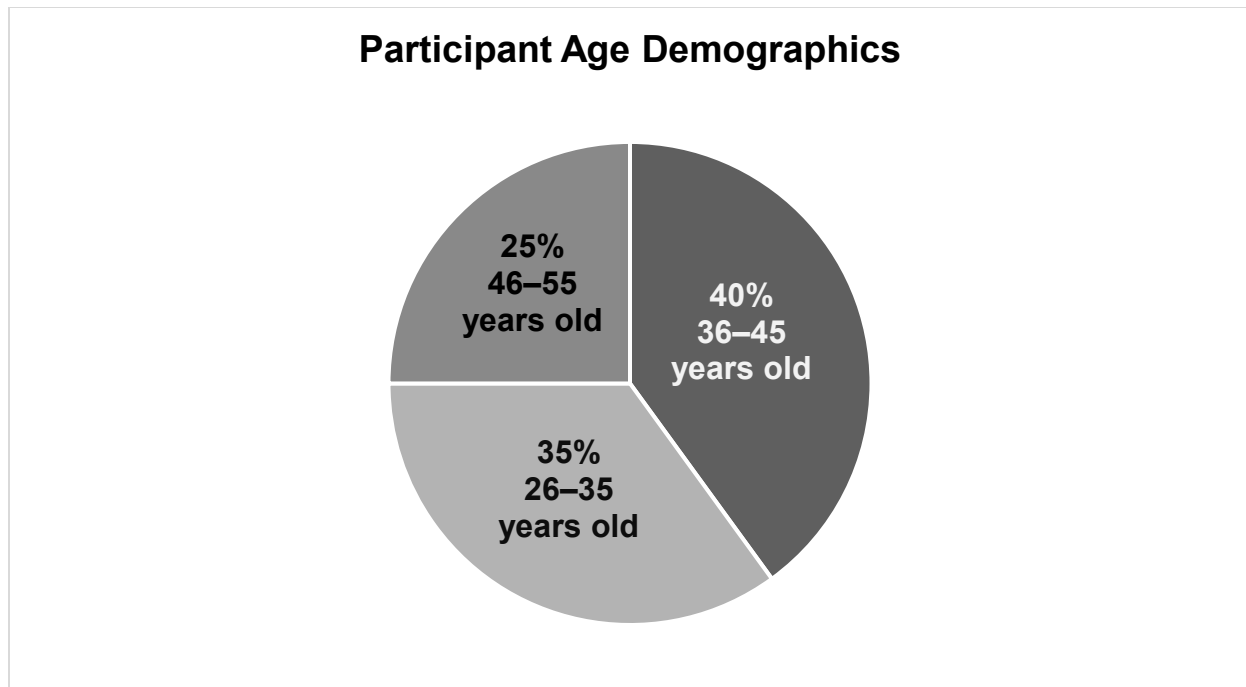


Figure 2. Age demographics of study participants.

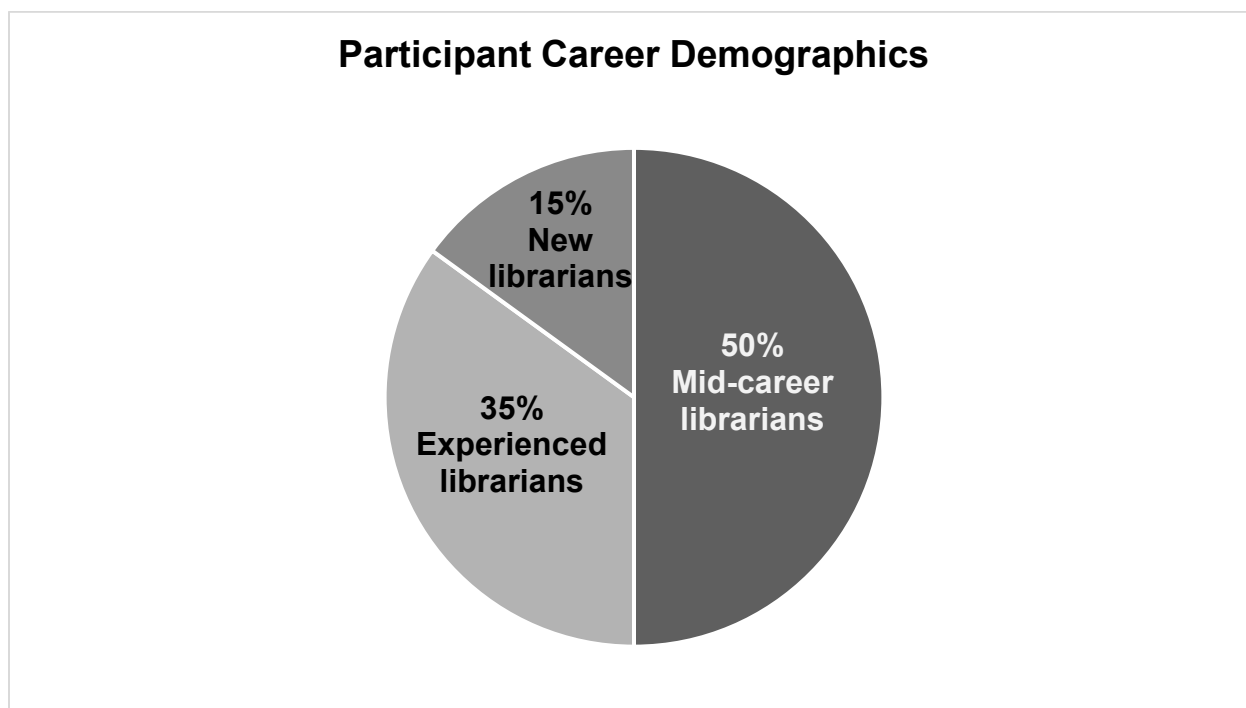


Figure 3. Career experience of study participants.

Regarding the workplace and low-morale trajectories, 70% of respondents shared that their public library served urban areas with populations of 50,000 or more; the other 30% served urban clusters (defined as populations between 2,500 and 49,999). Many survey respondents (53%) indicated that their low-morale experiences began between one and three years ago; just over a third indicated their experiences started between

four and six years ago. Quantitatively, the highest low-morale experience triggers (e.g., what kind of event[s] marked recognition that workplace abuse/neglect was occurring) for this participant group were administrative or managerial incompetence (80%), system abuse (60%), library administration changes (60%), work overload (50%), personality conflicts (45%), and department/unit management changes (45%). Other triggers included microaggressions (35%), lying/subterfuge (35%), and reductions in workforce/changes to library workforce (35%). Respondents were asked to share what kinds of abuse and/or neglect they faced and who abused them; they indicated high levels of emotional abuse (62%), system abuse (62%) and verbal abuse (46%) from supervisors. This group also indicated emotional abuse (50%) from library users and overwhelmingly indicated verbal abuse (93%) from library users. Table 1 shows a list of study participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Career Stage</u>	<u>Area of Work</u>
Female	Mid-career librarian	Spanish outreach services
Male	New librarian	Manager
Female	Mid-career librarian	Business services
Female	Experienced librarian	Adult services
Female	Mid-career librarian	Children's services
Female	Mid-career librarian	Special collections
Female	Mid-career librarian	Acquisitions
Female	Experienced librarian	Branch manager
Female	Mid-career librarian	Coordinator
Female	Experienced librarian	Youth services
Female	Experienced librarian	Youth services manager
Female	Experienced librarian	Branch manager
Female	New librarian	Generalist
Female	Mid-career librarian	Administrator
Female	Mid-career librarian	Public services
Female	Experienced librarian	Teen services
Male	Experienced librarian	Generalist
Male	Mid-career librarian	Technology services
Female	New librarian	Generalist
Female	Mid-career librarian	Business services

Procedure

Participants were asked to acknowledge informed consent documentation; after this acknowledgement, participants were asked to complete a short survey about general personal and career demographics. The researcher conducted twenty semi-structured interviews. These interviews included broad questions that allowed the researcher to seek specificity while offering the flexibility to follow up with participants on points of focus, for clarification, or to gather previously unconsidered information about the participants' narratives (see Appendix for this study's interview schedule). Interviews were recorded for verbatim transcription; any points of clarification were negotiated between the researcher and the participants as needed.

Data Analysis

Twenty interviews were transcribed, and Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive method was used for data analysis. Each transcript was reviewed several times in order to gather impressions and significant statements about the low-morale experience for public librarians. Significant statements were used to create formulated meanings and generate associated clusters, which in turn elucidated experiential themes. The data were also analyzed using open coding, a process that labels concepts and helps define and develop categories of data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This supports the phenomenological methodology by elucidating theme clusters. It also assists with comparison and conceptualization of the results.

Results

Data analysis

1. validated the development, path, and impact factors of low morale and emphasized types of abuse exacted specifically on public librarians and
2. revealed the unique impact factors public librarians face, which center workplace protocols, culture, socioeconomic developments, and political systems that influence or reflect contemporary lives and communities.

Data supporting the established path of general low-morale experiences will be shared first, followed by impact factors and enabling systems specific to public librarians.

Low-Morale Experience Validation

The low-morale experience includes several stages reflecting the experiencer's numerous responses to slow-building, long-term, and deepening exposure to abuse or neglect at work. As victims move through the experience and consciously or unconsciously determine their responses, they contend with *impact factors*: issues or events that influence every stage of the low-morale experience. These impact factors include *enabling systems*: individual behaviours or organizational cultures, structures, policies, or ethos that inadvertently enforce or underpin low-morale experiences.

Enabling systems are particularly problematic because they are often mechanisms put in place ostensibly to prevent workplace dysfunction but are often revealed to cause or extend periods of abuse and/or neglect.

Low-morale experiences begin with a trigger event, which reveals a co-worker as an abuser; additionally, trigger events remain constant even if different abusers appear during the experience. During low-morale experiences, victims are subjected to different types of abuse and begin to develop associated physiological, affective, and cognitive markers. These markers lead victims to engage in coping strategies, mitigation methods, and recovery (or attempts to recover). Table 2 summarizes the stages of the general low-morale experience. In this study, participants reported all of these stages.

Table 2

Stages of the Low Morale Experience

<u>Stage</u>	<u>Event</u>
1	Unexpected Trigger Event
2	The Impact of the Trigger Event
3	Emotional and Physical Responses to Trigger Events
4	Long-term Exposure to Workplace Abuse/Neglect
5	Emotional, Physical, and Cognitive Responses to Long-Term Workplace Abuse/Neglect
6	Negative Effects on LIS Practice and Career Outlook
7	Onset of Coping Strategies
8	Engagement in Mitigation or Resolution Efforts
9	Long-Term Effects of Low Morale
10	Low Morale Recovery
11	Low Morale Experience Lessons
12	Low Morale Experience Impact Factors

Abuse Categories

Respondents recounted instances of the following categories:

- *Emotional Abuse* including manipulation, thwarting, targeting, social exclusion, or micromanaging;
- *Verbal or Written Abuse* including lying, public shaming, microaggressions, castigation, scorning, ephemeral or unfounded complaining, disinforming, or snitching. Verbal abuse also included using oral communication to circumvent formal reprimanding or written response policies or processes with the intent to hide 1) verbal abuse and 2) associated system abuse;

- *System Abuse* including system rigging, cronyism, nepotism, or violating human resources or workplace policies and procedures;
- *Negligence* including *laissez-faire* or ambivalent library, municipal, or political leadership/administration, incompetence, lack of advocacy, capricious decision-making, or ineffective communication (Kendrick, 2017); and
- *Physical abuse* including hitting, punching, shoving/pushing, charging, throwing items, and formal or crude weapons usage.

Physical and verbal abuse were most often performed by library users and were often couched in occupational exposure to houseless library users or library users dealing with possible mental illness or substance abuse. A Spanish services librarian shared,

We are situated [less than a block] from a homeless shelter... a lot of the homeless come into the library and we're dealing every day with alcoholism, drug use, mental illness... Sometimes I'll have to wake up patrons that are sleeping and then I get told, "fuck off."... this guy called me a fucking whore and a fucking bitch. That's—it's almost like that at least once every other week. No joke.

A female branch manager echoed,

We deal with a lot of homeless, a lot of people who are under the influence...we had a situation where I and a guard were walking a patron [out of the library] because of their behaviour that day, and the patron threw [a completely filled beverage bottle] at us as we were walking behind him.

Public librarians also frequently reported instances of administrative negligence as triggers for and during the development of their low-morale experiences. This negligence was often revealed via library managers' or library administrators' responses to librarians' reports of verbal, physical, or system abuse. A female public services librarian recounted,

[A] patron grabbed one of my colleagues, and so, you know, physically assaulted basically...So, we called for the police because that's what you have to do, and did all of the proper paperwork and everything in order to have this patron no longer be allowed to be in our library so that they couldn't assault staff members. Shortly after that happened, we were notified that all of that had been for nothing and that that person was being allowed back into the library.

A male branch manager revealed that even rare cases of negligence—especially when revealed via abuse or neglect—have an impact:

[Another] thing that has kind of contributed to low morale for us would be sort of a lack of a consistent and strong administrative response. Generally, we are told that when we have to take action, say, to remove someone from the library for the day or potentially ban them for longer than that depending on the conduct—administration, they'll back us up, they'll provide us with the support that we

need. And there have just been a couple of cases where—not very often—but when it happens, it's conspicuous that we don't feel as supported.

Abuse Responses

Most participants shared emotional, physiological, and cognitive responses to the abuse or neglect they faced.

Affective. Participants shared their immediate emotional reactions to trigger events, including shock, anger, fear, and frustration. As their low-morale experiences developed, feelings of disappointment, sadness, powerlessness, and deepening, consistent anger arose. While discussing how her feelings traveled through Kübler-Ross's (1969) classic grief cycle (the five stages of grief), a teen services librarian who experienced managerial incompetence and emotional abuse noted,

And through all the stages like, the anger was there, the bargaining was there. The bargaining came first, like, "oh I can get this back if only we do XY and Z." But, like, the anger and the sadness, like the profound sadness. And then at some point the acceptance came in the format of you know, "I'm just going to do a job and find my dreams elsewhere."

Feelings of isolation were common and expressed in two ways:

1. feeling like the only one who is being abused or neglected and
2. seeking validation or questioning the validity of the experience.

Concerning the former channel of isolation, a male branch manager shared an impact of verbal abuse: "It leads to a sense of, you know, just feeling very isolated out here, and feeling very chewed up." Illuminating the latter frame of isolation, a participant disclosed,

when I saw [the study invitation], I thought the whole low morale thing—in a library, I just thought it was like a unique situation to us, like maybe it's just us—our department? I hope that—it kind of was comforting to know that it might be going on in other libraries.

Another participant, after sharing her story, eagerly queried, "do you think that this is unusual? My experience?"

Physiological. Respondents shared numerous physiological responses to their low-morale experiences: general heightened states of stress, exhaustion, and fatigue were most common. Participants also indicated hair loss, sleeplessness or sleep disruptions, nausea, gastrointestinal problems, weight gain, and diagnoses of hypertension. The levels of stress, exhaustion, and fatigue cannot be overstated for this group, who explicitly linked these responses to their emotional responses. One youth services librarian asserted, "it's physical exhaustion, as well as kind of emotional exhaustion," while another female participant disclosed, "I was physically and emotionally drained when I came home from work. I didn't get out of bed yesterday."

Cognitive. A marker of the low-morale experience is the development of cognitive responses. Public librarian participants' cognitive responses included work dread (consistent and increasing repulsion when preparing for or en route to the workplace), reduced professional confidence, reduced ability to concentrate, self-censorship, and depression: one participant contemplated suicide after a major LIS-related career move resulted in emotional and system abuse. Rumination, the act of excessive or repetitive thinking about a concern or problem without coming to a resolution, also impacted this group's ability to recover from exposure to abuse or neglect. A public services librarian revealed, "I definitely have a harder time when I'm done working, coming out of the mindset of work, of worrying about it, of thinking about it, of dealing with it..." During low-morale development for this group, increased introversion was also a cognitive outcome. A business librarian said,

[I began] spending less time outside of the house. On the weekends I would just be inside the house and not leave. I just wanted to kind of decompress and not talk to anyone. Less socialization became a regular practice.

A male technology services librarian echoed,

I have a tendency, whenever I don't necessarily want to process something in an unhappy situation... I find myself doing more of my off-time like reading, playing video games, pretty much doing what in a normal point of consumption would be considered hobbies, but with me it became pretty much all I was doing.

Effects on Professional Practice

As affective, physiological, and cognitive impacts continued, low-morale experiences also began to impact participants' daily LIS practice and career trajectories.

Daily work. Disengagement and patron interaction avoidance were commonly reported effects on the core work of public librarians. A participant who experienced physical abuse from a patron admitted, "I'm not as likely to come out from behind the desk to help someone unless they need my help physically where they are, partly because I want to have that barrier between them and me." And a business librarian said, "I just kind of became numb to [patrons'] problems. It was more like, 'can we get this transaction over with?'"

Career expectations and outlook. Low-morale experiences revealed gaps between participants' formal LIS education and what they encountered in the workplace; moreover, repeated exposure to abuse and neglect negatively impacted their careers and ultimately changed their views about the LIS field. A generalist librarian quickly realized,

What I was taught in library school and what I encountered in professional library situations were so radically different as for me to question like, "why was I taught the things that I was taught?" So, in my experience, that meant that all of the coursework that I had done regarding the library bill of rights and what a public

library does, was kind of thrown out the window when I actually got into the public library and I saw that nobody adhered to those professional competencies.

A branch manager commented, “I got into the field to help people—not to handcuff them. I never once in my more than [a decade] of being a librarian thought that I would handcuff anybody.”

As librarians were exposed to abuse and neglect, they began feeling stuck in their careers; moreover, their positive feelings about the LIS field were greatly reduced. A branch manager dealing with negligence and system abuse declared,

I think it's a huge negative on my career... I feel like because I have these frustrations with upper management, because I let them know what my frustrations are, and, you know, and some of what I think and believe about how the library should be run, I feel like I wouldn't be looked favorably upon for a promotion.

Participants recounted leaving or planning to leave public libraries. One respondent stated, “I didn't feel like my career was going anywhere in that position, so I decided to leave public libraries altogether.” And another shared, “I am making sure that my next move is going to be to an academic librarian position.”

Low Morale Resolution and Recovery

Participants revealed how they tried to reduce low-morale experience effects or end the experience.

Coping strategies. Coping strategies are behaviours that low-morale victims perform to reduce the effects of their experience. The behaviours may be conscious or subconscious and positive or negative, and they do not affect workplace abusers or change the stages of low-morale experiences. Participants most often talked with colleagues or family members about their experiences. Particularly, it was noted that the comradery and goodwill among immediate colleagues was helpful in coping with persistent abuse or neglect. One participant remarked, “Despite everything, my coworkers, the group I work with—they're awesome. They are so awesome, support each other, that's the one bright light, I think.” Respondents also reported stress eating, exercising, meditation, bullet journaling, gratitude practice, going to formal counseling, setting firm work-life boundaries, and purposively engaging with professional library associations. A male librarian noted the importance of professional engagement, recalling,

If you don't see any opportunities in your job, then you go through professional groups like [state] Library Association, the American Library Association, and work with them. And go through their programs, you know, do work for them. And that's kind of what I did.

Mitigation methods. Mitigation methods are behaviours that low-morale victims perform to end their low-morale experience. Such methods often impact the abuser or

organization or work within the systems that allow (or are supposed to prevent) workplace abuse or neglect. Many study participants began seeking new positions in other organizations. Participants also began documenting instances of abuse or neglect, reporting their findings to Human Resources departments or employee unions, organizing labour unions, refusing requests or implied pressure to overwork, and confronting abusers to address their behaviour(s).

Recovery. Recovery for low-morale victims is highly individualized; however, this group discussed the main facets of attempts to regain equilibrium:

1. lessons learned and
2. low morale's effects carry to new positions, even if the new organizations are healthier.

A librarian working with increased numbers of houseless library users noted,

It has affected my life because I think it, it made me kind of, I think—working at that library made me understand a population that I really didn't know much about before working at the library, the homeless population. And I think in some ways gave me more empathy for them, and then in some ways made me realize that there are serious problems in our society that leads to these kinds of situations. It just made me much more aware of that. And it made me more socially conscious.

When low-morale sufferers move on to new positions, they bring their wounds with them, which remain even if the new organization shows no signs of dysfunction. This finding validates that full recovery is long-term and resolution is uncertain. An acquisitions librarian disclosed,

[In my current position] I think I'm just always worried about what—I'm always worried—I mean, similar to how I felt at my old library, you know, I just worry that other librarians here or staff ... don't like the work I'm doing or ... I don't know. It's hard to explain. I just worry that other people are always judging me or not happy with the work I'm doing.

Respondents also recognized the immediate positive effects of removing (or being removed from) abusive and neglectful organizations or perpetrators. A technology librarian shared,

as soon as I started [my new] position, I immediately noticed that my behaviour was different. I was actively engaging a social circle of friends, I was actually getting out of the house. You know, pretty much most of my depression symptoms disappeared.

And a teen services librarian observed cautiously, “now that I have a new boss again ... it's been slow to come back but I'm coming back. Like, I'm trying new things, I'm starting new stuff, I'm pushing beyond what is the minimum required again.”

Low-Morale Impact Factors

Impact factors are issues or events that influence every stage of the low-morale experience. This group verified impact factors of insidious experience development and contagion.

Insidiousness. Low-morale experiences develop slowly, making it difficult for victims to identify, assess, and respond to negative treatment and associated outcomes. Insidiousness also includes the introduction and/or slow increase of different kinds of abuse (Kendrick, 2017). A children's librarian remembered,

[O]ver the course of like two-and-a-half years that I worked there, [my relationship with my manager] changed very drastically. When I started off there, it was a very—I didn't feel as though I was being manipulated emotionally. But looking back now, I can see that I was, terms of just departmental relations...and then there wasn't necessarily a point that I can—that sticks out to me in my head. But that emotional manipulation sort of turned around when I realized that what she was doing was not necessary—like in terms of work.

Contagion. Contagion occurs when low-morale victims often realize that their co-workers are also being abused, usually via observations of mistreatment or when colleagues share their instances of abuse or neglect. Librarians who experienced abuse may also began abusing others (Kendrick, 2017). A male librarian disclosed,

They would be abused themselves, but they would sort of take advantage of that I think. ...you know, it just wasn't just taking sick leave, but then they started acting out with, against other people. So, it precipitated basically just a lot of bad feelings between people.

Participants in management roles often shared their recognition of or attempts to reduce contagion in their departments. A female adult services librarian with direct reports asserted,

I want to not spread negativity. And I want people to feel like they can come in, to feel good about coming in to work. Because if I spread that negativity and the low morale, people will not want to come in to work and then I'll be even shorter staffed. They'll want to find another place to work.

Enabling systems. Enabling systems are also impact factors; they are individual behaviours or organizational cultures, structures, policies, or ethos that inadvertently enforce or underpin low-morale experiences. Table 3 shows low morale enabling systems. Participants affirmed all low-morale enabling systems except Tenure & Promotion, which is a process unique to academia.

Table 3*Low-Morale Experience Impact Factors for Academic Librarians*

<u>Impact Factor</u>	<u>Public Librarian Validation?</u>
Leadership	Yes
Staffing and Employment	Yes
Perceptions of LIS	Yes
Faculty Status/Tenure & Promotion	
Human Resources Limitations	Yes
Uncertainty & Mistrust	Yes

Leadership. Participants most commonly cited abusive or negligent leadership behaviours or toxic leadership styles as causes of escalating low morale in public library workplaces. Specifically, this group overwhelmingly noted a lack of administrative support and often shared the skills they wished formal library leaders possessed.

Administrative support. Respondents underscored inconsistent support from formal library leaders, managers, and supervisors, and this manifested in three ways:

1. formal leaders making policy decisions, seemingly without considering—or ignoring—the short- or long-term impacts on employee work,
2. formal leaders inconsistently or holistically ignoring formal policies that employees utilized in their daily work, and
3. formal leaders' reluctance to advocate for library employees' working conditions or library service provision.

An outreach librarian noted,

We're not getting the support we need from administration. We're like, "We need a social worker here. We need more security. We need this." And they're like, "Yeah, yeah. You know, it's just that we don't have money. We don't have money. We don't have money." But you're seeing other things going on in the library, and I'm like, "I thought we didn't have money?"

Laments to leadership. When discussing disconnects between formal leaders and employees, participants recommended knowledge, skills, and abilities for engaged, competent leadership. One participant observed that a good leader would be

Someone who's willing to do—[to] step in and do the work with us; to help us as a team member. Someone who was interested in mentoring, helping mentor us; help us grow our careers. Someone who wanted to listen to us, listen to our issues, our concerns. Someone who could help us realize our potential as librarians.

And another said,

I would give the employees a voice, more of a voice. I would have administration actually come down, because they're on [another] floor, all the, everything, all the reference offices are like on the [other floors]. I would have them come and look at, experience it. Not for a day, not for a week, [but] for a month and see what we go through. Work a weekend, work a night shift, work a month—See what we're going through. Maybe, maybe that will like open their eyes. Maybe they'll hear what I—hear and see what we're seeing. Work, or be in the trenches. You know, be in the trenches with us not be a colonel up on the hill watching your troops in battle.

Staffing and Employment. Staffing issues also intensified low-morale experiences for the participant group. Understaffing was often caused by attrition (not refilling positions as incumbents left) and organizational overreliance on part-time slots, which had a by-product of high turnover. These staffing challenges had an enormous impact on the ability of library employees to complete any work, from small projects to long-term or necessary administrative work. Participants noted that despite these barriers, they were expected to offer the same levels of service to their communities. A branch manager explained,

I expected when I came into [my role] that I'd spend somewhere between 30 to 40% of my time on the public floor dealing with direct customer service. Honestly, it's more like 90% because of how short the staffing is, so I wind up having to do payroll, scheduling, writing performance evaluations—stuff I really need to be concentrating on in my office—out on the floor. And then, you know, that negatively impacts customer service because the customers are always interrupting me and ... in order to provide good customer service, I don't want them to feel like they're interrupting me, you know? Short staffing definitely would be the other piece that, you know, contributes to the low morale.

An acquisitions librarian mirrored,

We had minimal staff, and so it resulted in long hours on the reference desk for the librarians. And as a consequence, we didn't have as much time to work on some of the other responsibilities that we were expected to take on. And there wasn't really much understanding from our director about that. Or at least, even if she couldn't get us more staff, there just wasn't any sense of empathy from her. She seemed to increase her—she had to put on more work despite the fact that our time off desk, when we could work on these things, was still very limited.

Library and Librarianship Perceptions. Library users' and other stakeholder perceptions and expectations of librarians and library services impacted the low-morale experiences of the participants. Participants shared frustrations about library users' unrealistic expectations of service. An adult services librarian expounded,

We're like the world's computer help desk. And people kind of expect us to know things right away. And help them with their technology, but also you know... we're trying to help kids with their homework or trying to do something with a reference question. So, there's a lot of, you know, "but I need this right now." Kind of our, with our society. So, that's kind of different and I think that contributes to the pace of our work. And maybe some of the stress of our work.

Social service provision expectations and formal leaders' operationalization of and responses to such expectations were major perceptions that were discussed at length.

Library as Default Social Services Provider. Participants shared that their library users—and even their municipal oversight bodies—increasingly perceive the library as a place to originate provision of social services that traditionally have been handled by non-profit organizations, community groups, or government agencies. Houselessness, substance abuse, and mental illness were most often discussed within this impact factor. A public services librarian observed in detail,

The elected officials basically have said, "Well, we have all these libraries open. All those people should just go there." And while I'm a firm believer that public libraries are for everybody, that creates a lot of problems, because we're librarians. We're not mental health workers. We're not substance abuse counselors. We're not, you know, any of the things that would address those issues, but we are seen as the Band-Aid to the problem... and rather than addressing that problem, they just basically foist it onto the libraries, and public service staff at the libraries are expected to handle the fallout.

Libraries situated in communities where there were no social services were most likely to be tapped as default spaces for such provision. Conversely, the policies implemented by traditional service providers also meant that libraries were just as likely to be identified as a default service space. A library administrator explained,

Our current shelter does not have all—it's not open all day. [Houseless people] can only stay for the evening and then they're—they're asked to leave in the morning—and then they're looking for places to stay warm, especially in the winter, so we ended up being a location where they can come...

Mission Creep. Intertwined with concerns of social service provision were worries about mission creep. Expectations of sudden and poorly conceived or implemented social service provision to houseless or ill library users revealed wide gaps in training, a lack of support and resources, and active pushback from library employees. A youth services librarian commented,

We have very limited ability to do anything in terms of someone who's dealing with a psychotic break, other than to call the police. And that's not always necessarily going to be the most helpful thing. Sometimes then I worry that that's going to exacerbate things. We don't have resources for people who are homeless.

A technology librarian stated,

I think a lot of systems want to use us as social workers, and most of us are not only not trained for that, but a lot of us don't want to necessarily do it either, otherwise we would've become social workers.

Human Resources Limitations. Participants who attempted to engage with formal human resources processes—including unions—noted their disappointment when such meetings resulted in no changes in abusers' behaviour or updates in workplace policies. One participant also recognized that talking with an HR representative would only highlight her as a target for more abuse: "If I went to anybody in the library, there's, it's not going to—it's not going to go anywhere. And in fact, I'll probably get repercussions from it."

Uncertainty and Mistrust. Random instances of abuse or neglect, poor organizational communication or interpersonal communication channels, and frequent changes in leadership caused feelings of uncertainty and mistrust in this group of participants. Uncertainty and mistrust is a particularly devastating enabling system because it continues into the recovery phase of low-morale experiences as victims bring their skepticism with them to their new positions or apply it to the LIS field overall. A female librarian who experienced administrative negligence, emotional abuse, and system abuse at multiple points in her public library career shared, "I'm very, very wary of public institutions to the point of thinking that they're certainly corrupt across the board." Another librarian who recounted a lack of support from administration shared, "I no longer trust that they make decisions based on or including any thought to my welfare."

Public Librarian-Specific Low-Morale Impact Factors

Data analysis shows that public librarians face three additional broad low-morale experience impact factors: personal safety, resilience narratives, and social contexts. These impact factors highlight the role of workplace health and shifting models of library management and community outreach.

Personal Safety. Participants in this study often discussed being exposed to situations that threatened their personal safety or health. They noted being near formal or makeshift weapons and encountering biohazardous materials (e.g., used drug paraphernalia). They also detailed instances of exposure to bodily fluids that potentially carry communicable disease pathogens (e.g., blood, urine, feces), noting that these fluids were often discovered in expected but inappropriate places (e.g., bathroom walls) and unexpected locations (e.g., on the carpet of a public reading room) on library property. Understaffing played a role in this impact factor as participants discussed links between fewer employees being present and an uptick in being exposed to potentially dangerous situations. A branch manager shared,

There's anecdotal evidence to support the fact that when there are fewer people around, there are some library users who even know "this is a day when there are fewer staff here... so that's the day when I'm going to act out." And it leads to

these pockets where you might find yourself alone in the building for even just an hour but, you know, we've had hours where it's just that one hour and you know, two different situations are melting down and the staff member is having to deal with that. And by the time we get everything taken care of, that staff member is rattled enough to need to go home for the rest of the day. I can't say for sure that more staff would fix that, but it definitely seems like it would—it would be a step in the right direction and it seems also that back during the times when we did have more staff, we also had fewer of these incidents.

Public librarians are often required to report instances of violence or medical emergencies that occur in the library. Within this impact factor, it is important to note that librarians who are experiencing upticks in violence or medical chaos at their libraries also noted that such reports are viewed as a revisiting of trauma. As a result, incident report protocols reinforce their feelings of insecurity and workplace danger.

Resilience Narratives. Study participants revealed their experiences with resilience narratives, expressing their initial guilt and eventual anger for bearing the brunt of system failings. A female librarian who experienced system and emotional abuse—and who attempted to report the abuses—shared,

[My library administration] would do a good job of, of arguing with you and making you feel like you were the problem. It's like, "Well, we're moving you because—we're moving you to another branch because you can't handle the stress here." So, they would then—they still do—they really know how to turn it to make you feel like you're the issue, that you're not doing well. So that's what I was feeling. I'm like, "What am I doing wrong?" You know?

Study participants also discussed the daily application of resilience, revealing it as a myth that hides the actual trajectory of "bouncing back" from constant exposure to abuse. A branch manager detailed:

So, you come in on "your Monday," whatever day that may be, and you're at 100%, right? So, you go through your Monday and maybe you have two or three or four small incidents that kind of just wear you down a little bit. You go home and you're at like a 60%, right? And you have 12 hours at home where that's supposed to be your recovery time, that's supposed to be how you recover and when you recoup. Well, that's not enough time. So, you come in and the next day you're at 80%, let's say. And then you have a major incident and you go home that day at like 30%. By the end of the week, you really are at a major deficit because you can't effectively recover from these things every night between all the stresses that you have in family life, or maybe you don't have a super great support structure at home. And while I don't think it's administration's responsibility to handle your support structure at home, just to make sure that your family life is great... I don't know what these things are, but that things could be different with how we deal with our staff.

Social Contexts. Respondents shared that several social contexts influenced their low-morale experiences. While mentioned discretely in other impact factors in this study, the impacts of houselessness or lack of affordable housing, stigma of mental illness, and communities ravaged by drug use are made salient here and were holistically mentioned as factors that highlighted:

- needed health or social services that the library was not able to provide or that library employees were not trained to provide,
- a lack of community resources or library employees' inability to refer users to helpful resources (particularly in rural areas, where such services may not exist); and
- how librarians created, implemented, and enforced policies to reduce barriers, address library users' personal conduct and subsequent safety in the library, or ensure equitable access to services and collections.

Regarding the latter point, a library administrator recounted,

I think [libraries are] struggling to figure out how to accommodate the homeless issue and like, you know, giving them internet guest passes. How do we—because you know, it's funded by taxpayer money. So, if someone is homeless, A) they don't have an address B) they're not contributing to the funding of the library. But you still want to help in service though, so how do you navigate giving the access of service?

Enabling Systems. Public librarians also encounter seven additional enabling systems as they move through their low-morale experiences. The following data disclose systems that inadvertently proliferate abuse and neglect specifically in public library workplaces. Table 4 shows public librarian-specific low-morale enabling systems.

Table 4

Public Librarian-Specific Enabling Systems of the Low-Morale Experience

<u>Additional Factors</u>
Organizational structure
Library workplace culture
On-demand relocation
Policies
Training
Equity, diversity, and inclusion
Politics

Organizational Structure. Data show that public libraries' organizational structures can promote abuse and neglect, particularly those that are undergoing administrative

changes or characterized by stagnant workforces or rigid or insular leaders or employees. An adult services librarian commented,

I think there's a lot of change going on. [The new library director has] gone in and she wants to change a lot of things. A lot of our processes, a lot of our policies are changing. So, it's sometimes difficult to change immediately. Especially if you are dealing with a lot of people who've been in the library system for a long time.

Public libraries are often governed by boards of trustees, whose members may not have any experience with or exposure to the work of librarianship, which is often invisible. The push-pull of oversight combined with a lack of experience also exposes potential for workplace neglect. A participant recounted this conflict during an instance of neglect:

[T]he back-and-forth between the trustees, employees, and the city, and that was the only other context that really added to the stress of the situation. [It] was that like, that, [the neglect] didn't really need to be focused on. Like the trustees don't really care, because they just want a body doing the job.

Larger organizations also contend with bureaucracy, which makes employees dealing with low morale perceive that changes are happening too slowly.

Library Workplace Culture. Participants shared aspects of workplace culture that may be familiar to general workplaces but are particularly characteristic of behavioural norms that promote low morale in public libraries. A female branch manager observed,

We have the most atrocious rumour mill... people like rumors, and it seems to be something that, that we a society don't have any kind of humane—"that's not your business, this is my private business," whatever. It seems like we're all extremely attracted by rumors and the gossip mill. But it is really, it is a devastating practice.

A business librarian remembered,

The environment was very clique-ish. If you look like someone, or if you talk like someone, or if you thought the same way, then you were in the clique. If you didn't, then you were marginalized. You were always seen as angry or mean. And that was sort of ever-present in that environment.

On-Demand Relocation. Public librarians are often hired by municipal (county or city) agencies. As a result, they are subject to be assigned—and re-assigned—to any branch in a library system. Related to the general enabling system of uncertainty and mistrust, but unique to this participant group, the practice of on-demand relocation was often discussed. Respondents shared that they would be re-assigned to various system locations without warning. One participant remembered,

I actually was called into a meeting, I had no idea what was going on—And they told me, "Oh, yeah, and within the next week you're moving to the branch library.

Have a good day.”... But um, yeah, it was a total surprise to me. I did not know that that was going to happen.

As revealed in the resilience narrative impact factor, on-demand relocation was perceived as a mechanism that formal leaders used to enact retaliation, punishment, or favoritism.

Policies. Non-existent policies, inconsistent policy enforcement, and the supremacy of informal (oral) policies contributed to the development of low morale for public librarians. A branch manager described,

the policies and procedures in the staff manual in general. Like, even we have within the department a local scheduling guideline for how people are supposed to request off and things like that. So, it's all written very explicitly—you know what it is, but when I would go to enact it, [the administrators are] like, “Well, you have to do it this way or I can't approve this.”... It made me feel kind of lost. Like, here's the policies and procedures, but there's this whole unwritten set of guidelines that the institution seems—or the department, I should say—the department seems to have followed for however long that are kind of hard to know exactly what's what.

Training. Linked to issues about policies were concerns about training, namely that it was often haphazard, or not offered at all. A business librarian noted,

There's also been a real down take in training or standards of service expectations. Those things when people are starting—and there's a lot of new people starting all the time because of the high turnover—there's nothing set in place to train them and those people are often set out on their own to offer services and develop bad habits that are simply defensive against [the] onslaught of need.

Intriguingly, this participant group also viewed their exposure to abuse or neglect as a form of useful training. A special collections librarian explained,

In some ways I think it was, even though I wouldn't want to repeat this experience, it made me a stronger librarian, because after that it was kind of like, “well, this isn't as bad as the time [this incident happened at my library]” (laughs), so... I haven't had any situation since then that has been, knock-on-wood, that, that challenging, ... I work now in a system that's more in the suburbs and we sometimes—we once in a blue moon have an incident and I'm always the one who takes care of because I'm like, “Well, this is, this is nothing. I can take care of it.” ... I now feel, you know, like I have the authority to handle these situations because I've done them in the past. Not that I would think trial by fire is necessarily the best way to gain those skills, but nonetheless how I gained those skills.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Racial and ethnic minority and White study participants revealed the inadvertent negative effects of equity, diversity, and inclusion

(EDI) efforts or issues in the workplace. Microaggressions, cultural competency issues, marginalization, tokenism, and White privilege were all reported. A Latinx participant said,

[T]hey hired me specifically was because I speak Spanish and they wanted someone to reach out to the community. So, whenever anything, anything that has to do with Spanish comes up or whatever, they refer it to me. Which is fine, but I've expressed—I want to do other things besides that. You know? And they're like, “No, no...”

A White librarian recounted,

[My new White female supervisor] proceeded to kind of bumble that too and tell people how sad she was that [patrons in an African-American community] didn't welcome her more warmly. And it was kind of like, “well you know, I've got to tell you: African-American neighbours who've lived there for sixty years don't actually have to welcome the hipster middle-aged White lady.”

Politics. The ongoing impact of the results of the 2016 United States Presidential election cycle were commonly discussed among respondents who practice librarianship in the United States. Reduced civility, breakdowns in customer interactions, and increasing threats of violence or intimidation by patrons were shared during interviews. A branch manager summated:

Since the 2016 election and the results of said election, there really has become this, this environment in this society of, “well if, if the people at the top can say whatever the hell they want to, so can we.” Really it has become very systemic as far as from the patron perspective, this attack of race... I witness it on a daily basis. I mean, it's pretty much, it's pretty pervasive... But the society in which we live, in which we provide public service has really become very volatile—and very unhappy. And that makes it very difficult for us in public service to say, “Hey, what can I do to help you today?” because even just that statement, just that question alone can bring about an aggressive reaction. It's—you just never know. You never know when someone's going to pop off and respond negatively to just a question.

Discussion

Public librarians validated previous reports of the stages of low-morale experiences, including abuse types and negligence. This group also substantiated physiological and emotional responses to low-morale trigger events and physiological, emotional, and cognitive responses as their low-morale experiences developed. Public librarians are the first group within the LIS field to report a new category of abuse—physical abuse—and to indicate that physical abuse is most often perpetrated by library users. Additionally, public librarians experienced verbal abuse most often from library users. These new data highlight the impact of library users' behaviour on the climate of the

library as a workplace and its relationship to morale as librarians engage in their practice.

This study's data show that low-morale experiences negatively impact public librarians' LIS practice, career trajectory and outlook, and mental and physical health.

Respondents also reported that as their low-morale experiences progressed, they began utilizing coping strategies to reduce associated emotional and physiological effects; they also began engaging in mitigation methods to try to resolve their experiences. Those who were able to remove themselves from their low-morale experience recognized and applied lessons they learned from their ordeal, and they also realized that full recovery takes time and may never be complete. This was especially true for participants who started new jobs and quickly realized they carried the fallout of emotional or system abuse with them to their new organizations, which resulted in sustained feelings of worry, isolation, and skepticism.

This group also validated the impact factors, including most of the enabling systems, of the general low-morale experience. Insidiousness and contagion, along with the enabling systems of leadership, staffing and employment, librarian/librarianship perceptions, human resources limitations, and uncertainty and mistrust offer an uncompromising context to the gaps in leadership training and development, increases in job precarity, consequences of understaffing, waning fiduciary support of libraries, subversion of employee rights, and general workplace dysfunction of contemporary public libraries in the United States and Canada.

Focusing on results that are specific to public librarians, data disclosed that this group contends with three more impact factors and seven more enabling systems than academic librarians during their low-morale experiences. Personal safety, resilience narratives, and social contexts pervaded all aspects of the phenomenon; moreover, for this group, these impact factors were interrelated. Personal safety concerns were often contextualized by descriptions of interactions with user groups who are socially underserved, marginalized, or stigmatized by houselessness, substance abuse, or mental illness; moreover, librarians often felt to blame for being unable to:

1. provide support and services that these users sought from the library,
2. offer or identify referrals to other, more appropriate organizations for needed social or health-care services, or
3. bounce back quickly from the onslaught of daily compromises to their physical safety, constant battles against compassion fatigue, or gaps in their ability to provide equitable or satisfactory assistance to library users.

Tables 5 and 6 compare impact factors, and enabling systems, between academic librarians and public librarians.

Table 5

Comparison of Low-Morale Experience Impact Factors for Academic and Public Librarians

<u>Academic Librarians</u>	<u>Public Librarians</u>
Insidiousness	Insidiousness
Contagion	Contagion
	Physical Safety
	Resilience Narratives
	Social Contexts

Table 6

Comparison of Low-Morale Experience Enabling Systems for Academic and Public Librarians

<u>Academic Librarians</u>	<u>Public Librarians</u>
Leadership	Leadership
Staffing and Employment	Staffing & Employment
Perceptions of LIS	Perceptions of LIS
Human Resources Limitations	Human Resources Limitations
Uncertainty & Mistrust	Uncertainty & Mistrust
Faculty Status/Tenure & Promotion	Organizational Structure
	Library Workplace Culture
	On-demand Relocation
	Policies
	Training
	Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion
	Politics

Enabling systems unique to public librarians are organizational structure, library workplace culture, on-demand relocation, policies, training, EDI, and politics. Respondents shared that their organizations were constantly undergoing changes. Specifically, they discussed high turnover in administrative and managerial ranks that was accompanied by little to no communication. Highlighting a push-pull dynamic, the organizational structure enabling system also revealed consequences of library organizations that do not progress at all due to administrative aversion to innovation or affinities for organizational insularity (the latter often made apparent through subversive or biased hiring practices). Linked to organizational structure is the enabling system of library workplace culture. Public librarians dealing with low morale cited how individual behaviours like gossip, relational aggression (“mean girls”), cliques, and silos amplified negative organizational attitudes and norms. Such cultural norms intensified feelings of isolation and caused study participants to reduce their engagement with work, forgo opportunities for collaboration, and seek other employment.

On-demand relocation protocols, which are unique to public librarianship practice and generally expected, arose as an enabling system due to the unique aspect of mistrust and uncertainty they cause in practice. Respondents shared that they were often informed of work location changes without notice (even if policies shared that a minimum fair notice would be given) and that such decisions were made without any regard for the impacts they would cause on respondents' personal lives (e.g., logistics of commuting, dependent care). Additionally, such decisions were perceived as a form of retaliation or punishment. The arbitrary use of employee relocation also showcases how the enabling system of policies is operationalized. Respondents shared how their library's policies were often:

- a) not followed,
- b) not enforced, or
- c) undermined by oral policies or administrative/managerial veto (or *carte blanche* acquiescence to the complainant—usually a library user).

These realizations caused feelings of helplessness, disappointment, anger, and confusion.

The enabling system of training was also linked to policies. Respondents shared that often, their own training was spotty; additionally, they shared observations of co-workers' lack of training or poor training if any was offered. Most troubling in this enabling system is that respondents perceived constant exposure to patron abuse as a helpful form of training, and they perceived that such exposure boosted their competitiveness and showcased a certain skill set that was desirable for and applicable to securing another public library job.

Respondents who identified as racial or ethnic minorities cited the conflict between promoting the value of EDI and the implementation of these values in their organizations. Participants recounted experienced and observed racial microaggressions, social marginalization, and tokenism. They revealed gaps in their formal leaders' cultural competency skills and their White colleagues' inability or reluctance to recognize their White privilege or dismantle the systems that protect and promote such privilege. Racial and ethnic minority and White respondents also revealed subtle or blatant forms of retaliation when they attempted to rectify EDI missteps, reverse attempts at pigeonholing, or reject stereotyping, racist ideology, or oppressive behaviours from their formal leaders or colleagues.

Politics, especially the results of the 2016 United States Presidential election cycle and its continuing impacts, affected public librarians' low-morale experiences. This group repeatedly cited Donald J. Trump's ethos—which was generally described by participants as divisive, non-empathetic, racist, and fear-mongering—as causes for increases in negative patron interactions. Respondents shared instances of uncivil patron behaviour and recognized that attempts to assist users—even at their request—were increasingly met with short-fused temperaments, callousness, vitriol, and

condescension. Additionally, these patron's responses often invoked the controversial rhetoric of the forty-fifth occupant of the office of the President of the United States.

Conclusion

Public librarians' low-morale experiences illuminate the role of resilience narratives and vocational awe in public library practice. Overwork, mission creep, and understaffing are compounded not only by what the general public believes librarians traditionally have done (which often does not match with the varied work of librarians, which is mostly invisible labor), but by their notions of what else librarians should be doing in light of technological advancements, market and industry disruptions, and a lack of community and/or social services. These expectations are intensified and exacerbated by formal library leaders' perceived reluctance to recognize and resolve the conflicts that pit advocating for librarians against the fiduciary concerns of the libraries' owning governments or municipalities. Libraries' organizational structures and cultures underpin resilience narratives as individual employees are held accountable for system shortcomings or punished or shamed for not being able to traverse convoluted or purposefully subverted protocols to reduce their suffering. While dealing with abuse and neglect, a lack of advocacy for their workplace wellbeing, and retaliation for trying to take control of the same, respondents in this study consistently reiterated their desire to continue their LIS practice so they could help others, and they experienced significant emotional conflict as a result.

Enabling systems for public librarians' low-morale experiences also disclose why LIS practitioners may be prone to workplace abuse and neglect. Participants shared that they joined the profession to help people; however, LIS work is often invisible. As contextualized in the study results and buoyed by recent discussions in higher education (Fister, 2019), that invisibility may engender condescension from those who do not work in library environments or who are distanced from the daily work of library operations, programs, and service provision. Study participants also revealed large gaps in formal library education and the real-world expectations of library work, which left them without frameworks and tools for hard skills (e.g., budgeting, technology skills) or soft skills (e.g., leadership, assertive communication, time management) that could assist with actively avoiding or dismantling systems and factors that underpin workplace abuse or neglect.

This study is an effort to continue documentation and verification of low morale in the LIS field in order to advance discussions on measures against workplace abuse and neglect. This work adds to research on LIS workplace incivility and dysfunction and offers further context to the actuality of librarian-user interactions in public libraries. Moreover, the study is relevant to discussions of emotional labor in LIS practice and offers credence to the role and impact of compassion fatigue on librarians. Impact factors and enabling systems for this group also add rigorous foundation to scholarship and commentary on leadership and management training, particularly within the realm of empathetic, authentic, and servant leadership guidelines.

This research leads to deeper inquiry regarding the need for additional areas of expertise (e.g., social workers, first responders) to be present in libraries and working collaboratively with librarians and simultaneously promotes the importance of library employee advocacy. The results of this study call for a deep look at how communities, their political leaders, and even formal library leaders perceive the value and the roles of the people working in their community libraries. Most importantly, the study offers a stark framework for current developments in libraries including the implementation, impact of, and library user responses to security measures that may marginalize and alienate those who use library spaces the most (e.g., Winnipeg's Millennium Library; CBC News, 2019) and the push-pull of mission creep as library workers are tasked with offering more services—including administering anti-opioid overdose medication—while dealing with funding cuts (Baird, 2019). Further work on any of these topics, as well as others revealed in this study and not listed here, would be a positive step towards building countermeasures that prevent, reduce, or eradicate workplace abuse and neglect in what remains, writ large, an enduring beacon of democracy, citizenship, education, and authentic community for many, including librarians themselves: the public library.

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

1. Please describe a situation in which you experienced low morale while employed at a public library. Choose an impactful experience, and be sure to describe the situation as it developed. Be as specific and detailed as possible.
2. If you believe there were any historical or current institutional or cultural contexts that may have contributed to your experience, please share them.
3. If you believe there were any social or political contexts that may have contributed to your experience, please share them.
4. If you believe there were any formal or informal policies, procedures, or practices that contributed to your experience, please share them.
5. As fully as you can, please describe how this experience has impacted you, your library practice, or your library career.
6. Please share any other comments about your experience that you wish.
7. Do you elect to receive more information about counseling at this time?

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