

Introduction

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This book was born out of frustration: the nagging feeling you get when something isn't right, but you can't quite pinpoint *why* or even *what* exactly is wrong. The two of us were working on two different qualitative research projects in 2017, one on the relational work of library instruction coordinators and another on instruction librarians' agency and identity as teachers in higher education. Each required hours of interviews with librarians across the country, some of them short and light-hearted, others long and heavy on the feelings. Yet in most interviews, there was always *that* story. The one that stood out. The one that stung. These stories stuck with us not just because of the frustration they caused, but because they were so commonplace and familiar they were almost mundane. There was the one about the professor who emailed asking a librarian to teach their class the next day because they were going to be out of town; the one about the librarian who was mistaken for a student; the one about the instructor who interrupted the librarian multiple times and shared incorrect information about the library; the one about the librarian who worked for five years to get faculty in their liaison department to trust them enough to teach an information literacy session for them.

These stories sound familiar, don't they?

These are the stories we share at conferences, in Twitter rants, on blog posts, and with trusted colleagues. We've all been there. We all get it. But why do these stories persist? This was the question that stuck with us and made us want to learn more about why those of us who work in libraries end up in situations such as these, ones where we are treated poorly, ignored, or devalued. Like any good librarian, we read and researched.

We read all of Deborah Hicks' qualitative studies on librarians' constructed identities and realized how being a service-oriented profession impacts what we value as librarians. We made notes on Lisa Slownioski's article, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," until her insightful commentary on emotional labor in library work was unreadable underneath our orange pen scratches. We devoured Roma Harris' *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession* and marveled at the relevance of her 1992 feminist take on librarianship to the state of the profession today. We are deeply indebted to her work, and it was through our exploration of her ideas in relation to contemporary research that we found focus around a singular idea: the concept of service and its relationship to library work as feminized labor.

The word service is, as Andrew Wang describes in his chapter, *Bottoms Up: A Queer Asian Perspective on Service-Oriented Academic Librarianship*, "seemingly innocuous." It shows up everywhere in our profession: from job ads that ask for candidates with a strong service orientation to the American Library Association's *Core Values of Librarianship*, which states: "We provide the highest level of service to all library users,"¹ to colleagues and supervisors who characterize librarianship as a service profession. Research into the construction of librarians' professional identities indicates a strong emphasis on our work as service providers, from both within the profession and the larger academic environment in which we exist.² Service is woven into the fabric of our work and our identities as librarians, but it is rarely defined or described in an agreed upon way by library workers. It's a concept that is difficult to unpack and dissect, in large part because it is so bound up in librarians' professional identities and sense of self at work. To define service is to define ourselves as library workers, and that is a difficult thing to do in a profession as nebulous as ours.

When taken to its most negative extreme, the service ethos that informs librarianship can turn into what some in the field informally refer to as "Handmaiden Syndrome"³—the expectation that librarians be at the beck and call of faculty, students, patrons, or administrators. Lisa Sloniowski argues that an over-emphasis on librarians-as-service-providers devalues

1 American Library Association, "Core Values of Librarianship."

2 Hicks, "The Construction of Librarians' Professional Identities"; Hicks, "Advocating for Librarianship."

3 Beck, "Reference Services."

the intellectual work and emotional labor librarians do as co-educators.⁴ But Roma Harris believes that librarianship has the potential to transform the ideal of service from one that exploits those in service roles toward a more democratic and potentially empowering exchange.⁵

What both stances indicate, and what we've come to understand as the foundation of our research, is that the concept and practice of service in librarianship is inseparable from power. The practice of service is inherently people-focused and relational. To provide service, one person is serving another, whether it be through a virtual or face-to-face interaction, or through some kind of intermediary (e.g. creating metadata for library users to locate needed information). This interaction is not a frozen moment in time practiced in a vacuum. It is affected by time, context, history, and anticipated future, all of which are guided by the systems of power that influence all human interaction. Granted, we don't scrutinize every service moment in our day with intense care and concern, but that doesn't mean that these systems of power don't guide our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Neoliberalism, white supremacy, ableism, and heteropatriarchy are so dangerous for exactly this reason. They are insidious, having made their way into every aspect of life and culture without question. This way of being in the world is set as the standard, as neutral, while everything else is characterized as a deviation. When applied to service, these oppressive power structures create a system of subjugation that exploits those who seek to serve others. In this book we aim to explore this—at times fraught—relationship between service and power. Enacting service within oppressive power structures forces us to negotiate our professional identity and sense of personal worth with institutions that profit from our exploitation, individuals whose idea of service is servile, and a profession that holds service as a professional value without examining what it really means.

We recognize that there is a strong tension between those who believe librarianship is a service profession and those who either view service as a harmful ideal or see our profession as rooted in other ideals (i.e. education, user experience, information access). It can seem like an easy solution to simply distance ourselves from service in pursuit of commanding greater respect and prestige, but doing so rarely raises the status of jobs traditionally held by people from marginalized groups. The problem is not with the content and practice of service work but rather with the way in

4 Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian."

5 Harris, *Librarianship*.

which power structures characterize service work. It is meant to be submissive, servile, feminine, and “less than.” Service work, and the people who perform it, are devalued within our society which values whiteness, independence, and dominance.⁶ Here again we look to Harris and her analysis of “the ideal of service.”⁷ When members of feminized professions like librarianship attempt to bolster their professional status, the solution is often to embrace the trappings of “traditionally male professions” (i.e. law, medicine). The type of service, Harris states, that is practiced in feminized professions (librarianship, social work, nursing) is democratic in nature, incorporating the needs and wants of the individual patron or client in a power-sharing relationship. However, in traditionally male professions service becomes an expression of power over (rather than power-with⁸) the client. The professional is he who knows best, and bestows his expertise upon the client or patron.⁹ In attempting to transform librarianship by mimicking traditionally male-dominated professions, we run the risk of potentially distancing ourselves from the relational behaviors at the core of a feminist construction of service in libraries.¹⁰

We do, fundamentally, see librarianship as a helping profession rooted in relationships. We help others learn from, access, and think about information in all its forms. We teach, describe, organize, and build information systems that help users create and connect with knowledge and one another. We help learners develop their own knowledge schemas and encourage them to critically question the world. There is value in this relational work and nuance and skill to the act of helping others.¹¹ Is this service? We like to think so. Service-as-helping is the lens through which we see our work. Our work is for the library user, student, teacher, and researcher. Our work is for us, in that we gain pride, satisfaction, and, let’s not forget, income, from helping others. Our “service is not selfless.”¹² We want to be valued for the work that we do and have a degree of mutual respect and care in our working relationships with others. Service can feel

6 Harris, 13–20.

7 Harris, 19.

8 Surrey, “Relationship and Empowerment,” 165.

9 Harris, *Librarianship*, 19.

10 Harris, *Librarianship*, 20–21.

11 Arellano Douglas and Gadsby, “All Carrots, No Sticks.”

12 Douglas, “My Service Is Not Selfless.”

performative: Who taught the most classes? Who stayed at work the latest? Who is on the most committees or spent the most time at the reference desk or gave up the most of their life to their job? This altruism gone awry is a symptom of vocational awe.¹³ It creates a version of service that takes without giving and hides the work that goes into reproducing the academy, creating and sharing information, teaching, and sustaining libraries.¹⁴

We didn't develop this collection to denigrate the concept of service, but we do want to bring a critical eye to its development and practice. For us, that means applying a feminist, relational-cultural lens to service. We see service work as helping work, rooted in mutuality, empathy, and respect. Others may reconceptualize service in a different way or raise questions about the components of our work we ignore or devalue when focusing on service as the central value of our profession.¹⁵ But, by viewing service as malleable and open to critique, we can examine the impact of service on all library workers, especially those with marginalized identities, as Alana Kumbier does in her thoughtful foreword. We can create better working conditions for those at risk of exploitation. We can identify the ways in which service is (de)valued within higher education and look inward at librarianship at the ways that we perpetuate the devaluing of service work within our own profession. What kinds of library jobs are highly compensated and why? What experience and skill set is valued in library workers? What is seen as "real work?"

What expectations do we place on ourselves, our colleagues and the people we supervise under the guise of enacting good service? In having a critical understanding of service, we are better able to set limits on what we should be expected to give of ourselves and what is simply institutional exploitation. We can make structural change developing library policies and practices that set boundaries around expectations of service. In short, by deconstructing service we can redefine our profession as one that is more caring to both library users and ourselves.

With this purpose in mind, we divided this book into two sections, *Intersecting Identities and Service* and *Reworking the Concept of Service in Libraries*. In *Intersecting Identities and Service*, the authors examine varying aspects of identity and how they shape service expectations, the practice of service, and the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of the library

13 Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship."

14 Shirazi, "Reproducing the Academy"; Douglas, "My Service Is Not Selfless."

15 Muñoz, "In Service? A Further Provocation on Digital Humanities Research in Libraries."

worker. When we began talking to library workers about how they experience and enact service, we realized that many considered the idea of service to be neutral or objective. It was something done without thinking: expected, then delivered. But those same workers would often talk about incidents of workplace exploitation, low morale, and burnout from excessive workloads. These experiences were tied to ideals of service that demanded self-sacrifice and disproportionately impacted librarians with marginalized identities. What is demanded in pursuit of good service? What are the personal costs?

Siân Evans explores the mental and emotional weight of service in her chapter, reminding us that the practice of service, depending on its framing and expectations, is capable of inflicting harm. What this harm looks like or feels like varies across library workers, influenced in large part by their own identities and ways of moving through the world. As a feminized profession, gender plays a large role in the service expectations of librarians, and its intersection with power is discussed in Maura Seale and Megan Browndorf's chapter on the devaluing of the feminized labor of liaison librarians within the neoliberal framework of academia. Carli Agostino, Melanie Cassidy, and Ali Versluis connect the gendered nature of library service work to aspects of gender performativity, adding the dimension of fatness as a compounding layer of disenfranchisement. In many ways, the impact of exploitative service is embodied. Kelsey George applies this concept to ableism in librarianship, adopting a Disability Justice model to recenter service ideals around interdependence, and creating an ethos of care for library workers of all variations of ability. These ideas come together in Andrew Wang's exploration of feminized, embodied, service-oriented work through the experience of being a queer Asian American man. He introduces the concept of tactics, a subversive practice that allows him to perform service critically, in ways that claim and appreciate queerness, femininity, and "women's work."

In the second section, *Reworking the Concept of Service in Libraries*, authors reframe service as a means of empowering, rather than exploiting library workers. In reclaiming service as a professional value, we need to define it and set boundaries that determine the limits of our service. This can easily be characterized as an act of power-assertion and self-protection, but it is much more than that. In setting boundaries we are facilitating healthy, meaningful connections with our colleagues and library users. This is clearly seen in Christine Moeller's call for dismantling the idea that library instruction is a service, instead reframing teaching librarianship as a pedagogical partnership with classroom faculty. It's one way of changing our practice to change our institutions. In exploring this idea, some

authors, like Elizabeth Galoozis, turned to other feminized fields for inspiration on ways to facilitate empowerment and connection through service. Drawing parallels between midwifery and librarianship, Galoozis applies a feminist ethic of care to service, which continues through chapters by Jessica Denke and Shana Higgins, who both see the power of radical vulnerability and care to transform our service practice. Rather than dismiss service altogether, these chapters, along with those by Emily Puckett Rodgers, Rachel Vacek, Meghan Sitar, Silvia Vong, and Erin Leach work toward re-integrating it into our professional practice on our own terms.

After reading these chapters, we hope that the ideal of service and service work is no longer accepted at face value, but rather questioned as integral to power structures that need to be interrogated and reworked. Perhaps the initial development of a healthy relationship with service starts by setting boundaries for ourselves and others. We can limit the number of committees we agree to serve on, and work with our institutional administration to revalue service work. Librarians can advocate for and actually do less with less: fewer hours on the reference desk, fewer classes taught. Supervisors can create policies that protect library workers from harassment and burnout. It can seem difficult to set these boundaries in a profession as service-oriented as ours. We'll always run up against the need for our work and service—the students who need to learn from us, the patrons who need evening hours because they work during the day, etc.—but we need to collectively recognize that in giving without thought to our own well-being as library workers, we will give until we have nothing left. Our institutions will continue to take advantage of us because that's how these power structures operate. They function on exploitation and on doing more with less.

With that in mind, this book is also a call to those who hold power in libraries to recognize the limits of where our service begins and ends, and to help create new structures that protect those who engage in service. Barring that, we can take that power as library workers by setting these personal boundaries for ourselves and supporting one another in upholding them. We need to consider collective action across the library, as Max Bowman and Monica Samsky advocate for in their chapter on library workers in Access Services, as well as how empathy and solidarity can help us build stronger institutions for all workers. Many of us have engaged in behaviors that demean service performed by professional staff or student employees. When we say things like “not everyone who works in a library is actually a librarian” what point are we trying to make? Is it so important to our work that we make this distinction or is it motivated by a need to reinforce hierarchy? When we continue to transfer job responsibilities

to library staff and students because they are tasks that are seen as “easy,” “unskilled,” or “learnable” we are in fact devaluing not only that work but the people who perform it.

We need to ensure that we include all library workers in our reframing of service as a potential site of empowerment and care. Rather than feeding into hierarchical oppressive structures, we should be working together to create new service models that value all aspects of library work. There aren’t easy answers. It is important that we truly reconsider how service can lift workers up instead of co-opting the narrative that maintains the status quo. We want this book to open a new kind of professional conversation about power and its impact on the service we perform, and the people who perform it. We want to engage with as many different voices as possible in an honest, critical dialogue that inspires library workers to create change in their workplaces and institutions. A model of service that embodies respect for library workers is both possible and attainable. It is one that all of us who work in libraries deserve and should demand and we hope that reading this book will be one step in that process.

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