



Leadership Perspectives on Emotional Labour in Large Urban Public Libraries

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The demands of public library work have intensified, placing strain on both frontline staff and the leaders responsible for supporting them. Emotional labour—the regulation of emotions required in daily work—remains underexplored in library and information sciences research, particularly regarding how leaders manage their own emotional labour while supporting frontline staff. This study examines what library leaders know about emotional labour and how that knowledge influences their leadership and support for staff. Interviews with 27 leaders from three large Canadian public libraries reveal that leaders play a crucial role as middle managers, balancing staff well-being with organizational expectations. As authentic leaders, they strive to build meaningful emotional connections with their teams—often successfully—but at a personal cost. Despite their dedication, they have limited power to address systemic challenges such as precarious work, chronic understaffing, and the increasing pressure of societal issues, all of which intensify emotional labour demands. Addressing these challenges requires a collective effort. Libraries must adopt a proactive approach to emotional labour, emphasizing leadership development, shared responsibility, and comprehensive organizational support.

Keywords: emotional labour, library leadership, public libraries, authentic leadership, middle management, organizational support

Introduction

The experiences of emotional labour among leaders in urban public libraries, along with their responsibility to support staff through this process, form a critical yet understudied area in library and information sciences. This study examines how leaders at three large, urban public libraries in Canada experience emotional labour - both individually and through the experiences of their staff. Leadership has a significant impact on the employee's experience and for the purposes of this study, we look specifically at how leaders facilitate emotional labour support for their teams at individual and organizational levels.

Emotional labour—the regulation of emotions required as part of one's daily work (Hochschild, 1983)—has received limited attention within the context of library work. Moreover, little research has examined how library leaders perceive the need for organizational support for emotional labour. To address this gap in the literature, the current research investigates the primary question: “What do library leaders know about emotional labour and how does that knowledge influ-

ence their work with, and support of, library staff members?” This paper reports on some of the findings from a larger qualitative study and focuses on public library leaders' individual knowledge, experiences, and leadership approaches in relation to emotional labour. Specifically, the paper explores the way in which library leaders conceptualize emotional labour in the context of their work, how their approaches to leadership align with the culture of the organization, and the ways in which leaders feel supported in managing the emotional dimensions of their roles. A second paper explores further findings related to organizational support for emotional labour from this study.

Literature Review

Emotional Labour Theory

Emotional labour, most often associated with customer service roles including public-facing library work, involves managing emotions to align with organizationally defined display rules, often at odds with inner feelings (Matteson et al., 2015). For instance, adhering to a ‘service with a smile’ philosophy can create cognitive dissonance, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017; Grandey, 2003; Matteson & Miller, 2013). This emotional regulation is an expectation of the organization in library work and is often ingrained

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in library education and workplace training (Rodger & Erickson, 2021). Grandey (2003) conceptualized emotional labour through a dramaturgical lens, viewing work as a performance in which employees manage their emotions to meet organizational expectations. These expectations, or *display rules*, often require showing positive emotions and suppressing negative ones. In public library service, for example, staff are expected to provide “excellent, user-centered service” (ALA, 2023, p. 2), even when they may feel frustrated or overwhelmed. When emotions do not align with these expectations, employees may engage in *surface acting*—faking or suppressing feelings—or *deep acting*, where they attempt to genuinely feel the required emotion. Emotional labour occurs specifically in response to these display rules; it is not simply any experience of emotion at work. Studies show that surface acting, where no attempt is made to reconcile inner emotions with outward expressions, is positively correlated with burnout. On the other hand, deep acting, where one attempts a more authentic expression of emotions, often has fewer negative associations and can reduce the instances of emotional exhaustion (Hur et al., 2013). More consistent deep acting can produce higher levels of productivity and overall well-being (Chen et al., 2012; Johnson & Spector, 2007; Matteson & Miller, 2017).

Emotional Labour in Library Work

Library and information science (LIS) research has largely focused on ways in which frontline staff experience and cope with emotional labour with recommendations on how management can support staff (see, for example, Matteson & Miller, 2014; Peng, 2015; Rodger & Erickson, 2021). In both LIS and non-LIS literature, emotional labour is frequently explored in relation to creating healthier workplace environments; for example, by enhancing resilience (Bodenheimer, 2018; Delgado et al., 2022; Meacham et al., 2023), promoting authentic leadership practices (Erickson, 2021; Farr-Wharton et al., 2023; McAuliffe et al., 2019), boosting staff morale (Glusker et al., 2022; Kendrick, 2020), and cultivating leaders’ emotional intelligence to strengthen overall organizational culture (Martin, 2019; Martin, 2020).

LIS research highlights the emotional toll on frontline library staff, exacerbated by societal challenges such as housing instability, mental health crises, and issues such as substance use in libraries (Feuerstein-Simon et al., 2022; Garner et al., 2021; Ogden & Williams, 2022; Wahler, 2023). The sense of sacredness and idealism that attracts many to a library career often gives way to the daily challenges of working with the public (Ettarh, 2018), adding further dissonance between expected and real emotions. Growing evidence points to the impact on public library staff members’ morale, due in part to increasing physical safety issues (Kendrick, 2020). Perhaps the most concerning emotional labour demand is patron-perpetrated sexual harassment, stemming from the profes-

sion’s gendered nature (Allard, et al., 2023). All of these pressures may contribute to compassion fatigue, low morale, and burnout, compounded by workplace issues like understaffing and job precarity (Glusker et al., 2022; Kendrick, 2020; Martin, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). An emerging body of research on trauma-informed practices attempts to address these emerging challenges, advancing the recognition of significant psychosocial demands in public library environments (Found, 2024; Wahler, 2023). These practices offer guidelines grounded in principles of psychological and physical safety, such as setting boundaries during customer service interactions (Wahler, 2023).

Leadership Styles and Emotional Labour

Emotional labour is often viewed through the lens of frontline service workers, but leaders have also been recognized as performing their own emotional labour. They might influence their subordinates through “emotional contagion” (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017, p. 749), a process by which subordinates absorb and mirror a leader’s perceived emotions. As a result, leaders play a key role in their subordinates’ well-being, which affects both productivity and job retention (Walsh & Arnold, 2020). Specific leadership styles have been investigated and can significantly impact emotional labour outcomes. In general, supportive and ethical leaders promote deep acting, enhance job satisfaction and positively affect job performance (Chen et al., 2012; Moon et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2023). At the other extreme, abusive supervision - hostile behaviour towards staff (Yu et al., 2023) - exacerbates surface acting and emotional exhaustion, leading to burnout (Carlson et al., 2012; Martin, 2019; Martin, 2020; Mo & Shi, 2017).

A supportive leader values transparent communication and encourages autonomy and growth, which is essential to high morale (Duke et al., 2009; Glusker et al., 2022; Hur et al., 2013; Weyant et al., 2021b). Authentic leadership, characterized by transparency, empathy, and fairness, is viewed as a supportive leadership style for managing emotional labour (Gardner et al., 2009). Authentic leaders cultivate an environment where both leaders and employees engage genuinely, minimizing the need for emotional regulation techniques like surface acting (Erickson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2009; Kiersch & Byrne, 2015). Their empathetic approach provides for a “group self-consciousness” (McAuliffe et al., 2019, p. 143), creating a safe environment that allows staff to openly express their ideas and emotions. An authentic leader creates a stable work environment, which helps reduce job insecurity, employee exhaustion, and negative work behaviours (Wang & Xie, 2020). Kendrick (2023) emphasized that developing these leadership qualities benefits both employees and leaders’ own well-being.

Similarly, a servant leadership style enhances emotional well-being, productivity, and job performance (Lu et al., 2019). Servant leaders, over other leadership styles, place

the well-being of the subordinate staff member first (Lu et al., 2019) and are focused on “collaboration, mutual trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power” (Lo et al., 2020, p. 250). Overall, effective leadership that prioritizes empathy and authenticity can help mitigate the negative effects of emotional labour, such as compassion fatigue, low morale, and burnout, while fostering emotional resilience and healthier organizational cultures (Erickson, 2021; Martin, 2019).

Managing Emotional Dimensions of Library Roles

Managing emotional labour in libraries requires a combination of individual strategies, organizational support, and leadership practices that promote genuine emotional engagement. Matteson and Miller (2014) introduced a response-level framework outlining strategies across all organizational levels—incident response, training, supervision, human resources, and at the broadest level - organizational culture. Each level presents an opportunity for managers to support staff and mitigate the negative effects of emotional labour. This framework remains one of the most comprehensive examinations of emotional labour in current LIS research. Parts of the framework will be explored here, as they relate to the research question.

At the incident level, leaders are expected to respond and provide immediate support, particularly in volatile or emotional situations. Research clearly indicates the pitfalls of surface acting, such as increased stress and burnout, and emphasizes the importance of supervisor and organizational support to mitigate these effects (Peng, 2015). Surface acting in the form of ‘service with a smile’ is only effective if that smile is authentic because customer response is regulated by how genuine the service worker’s reaction is (Zhan et al., 2016). Supportive work environments encourage deep acting in customer service, a technique associated with improved job satisfaction and emotional well-being (Shih et al., 2014; Wang & Xie, 2020; Yoo & Arnold, 2016; Zhan et al., 2016).

Training programs, at the second level of the response framework, are essential in equipping staff with the skills to navigate emotional labour. Matteson et al. (2015) and Chau et al. (2009) advocate for staff training focused on developing deep acting skills, while other recent studies emphasize resilience-building, mindfulness, and trauma-informed practices. These approaches help staff regulate emotions, foster adaptability, and manage challenging interactions while maintaining their well-being (Bodenheimer, 2018; Hülshager et al., 2013; Wahler, 2023). However, Linden et al. (2018) explored common organizational stressors in public library work and their impact on burnout, concluding that training alone is insufficient. They argued that significant “management-guided interventions” (p. 204) are necessary to improve work conditions and reduce burnout risks. Effective support systems and designated spaces for decompression are particularly vital for managing emotional labour, especially

for those new to the profession (D’Angelos, 2023).

Matteson and Miller (2014) stress how supervisors (in their role as leaders) play a crucial role in shaping how emotional labour is managed within library organizations. Supervisors support staff who experience emotional labour but also engage in emotional self-regulation themselves. Training of supervisors, or leaders, in emotional regulation strategies has been shown to enhance deep acting techniques and improve leadership effectiveness (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017). Emotionally intelligent leadership is vital to fostering a healthy workplace, where workers are empowered to manage stress effectively and view challenges as manageable (Martin, 2019; Matteson et al., 2021).

The strategies employed by leaders have direct consequences for staff. Tang and Gu (2024) documented that surface or deep acting strategies used by leaders can impact employees’ emotional engagement and job performance. Specifically, when a leader utilizes surface acting techniques, it can evoke “feelings of insincerity and manipulation” (Tang & Gu, 2024, p. 414) in employees, prompting them to mirror this behaviour. In contrast, when leaders engage in deep acting—genuinely expressing their emotions—they strongly motivate employees to do the same (Tang & Gu, 2024). A cultural shift towards authentic emotional expression, supported by encouraging supervisors, fosters deep acting skills and a productive work environment (Chen et al., 2012; Matteson et al., 2015).

Alignment with Organizational Culture

An organization’s cultural values shape how emotional labour is understood, managed, and supported within library workplaces. Respectful communication, equity, and trust-building between leaders and staff help create positive morale and shared goals (Glusker et al., 2022). Positive staff morale is built in library organizations where supervisors genuinely listen to employees and support their agency in how they do their work (Weyant et al., 2021a). Creating a “human connection” (Martin, 2019, p. 7) builds trust and creates a healthy emotional culture where common goals can be developed and met. Additionally, the emotional intelligence of leaders is another key factor in building a healthy work culture (Kreitz, 2009; Martin, 2019; Martin, 2020).

Supportive organizational climates help workers to manage emotions positively, understand customer perspectives better, and reduce stress (Shih et al., 2014). Emotional labour requires significant mental effort, and falsely presented emotions (i.e., surface acting) can increase stress levels and reduce job satisfaction (Shih et al., 2014). Overall, a positive organizational support system helps to lessen or even negate a difficult situation, so it appears as less of a threat to the employee (Matteson et al., 2021; Yoo & Arnold, 2016).

Methodology

This qualitative study was guided by the question “What do library leaders know about emotional labour and how does that knowledge influence their work with, and support of, library staff members?” and sought to qualitatively examine public library leaders’ experiences with and understanding of emotional labour. Qualitative research explores lived experiences and the construction of social meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study used a generic qualitative approach to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences (Merriam, 2009) while ensuring alignment between research questions, methodology, and methods (Kahlke, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, ‘large’ was defined as an urban public library serving a population greater than 500,000. This study fulfilled the eight “big tent criteria for excellent qualitative research” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840) including: a pertinent and timely topic, rich and substantive data obtained through transparent disclosure of the purpose of the study, “thick description” with “showing not telling” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840) which was evident in the detailed quotes, and findings that arguably represent the experiences of other large, public library leaders.

Data were collected through individual, online (via Zoom) semi-structured interviews conducted between August and October 2024. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom’s transcription feature. Data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1998) to identify patterns and meanings across responses. Using Miles and Huberman’s analysis process of “three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10), the authors identified themes and patterns, grouped common themes together, and returned to the data recursively as new themes emerged to identify representative quotes for reporting.

Research ethics approval from MacEwan University was obtained before the study began. Prior to being interviewed, each participant provided informed consent and prior to publication, all names and identifying features were removed to protect their identities.

Participants

Twenty-seven participants from three large, urban public library systems were interviewed for this study. Library leaders were initially contacted through internal library communications. Eligible participants were required to have at least two years of experience supervising staff or overseeing library initiatives in a leadership role. Additionally, these leaders, or their direct subordinates, worked in customer service in some capacity. Participation was voluntary and the names of individuals who participated in the study were not shared with their libraries.

All of the participants were in positions with at least one direct report. In some cases, these direct reports were front

line library staff, while in other cases, the direct reports were managers or branch heads themselves. Participants had a range of educational backgrounds and professional experiences: Thirteen (48%) had a Bachelor of Arts (with many different specializations within this) and 19 (70%) had an MLIS. Most participants (81.5%) had been in their current position for more than two years and 77.8% had worked in libraries for more than 10 years. There were a variety of position titles, with Manager being the most frequent (though many variations of the title exist), followed by Librarian. Positions with the same title differed in terms of responsibilities between and within systems. The size of a branch, its patron demographics, and its overall staff and position within the larger system also varied substantially. The participants of this study were all positioned as middle managers, in that they had direct reports, but also reported to at least one layer of leadership above them.

Findings

This section presents data from 27 qualitative interviews presented thematically, with representative quotes. The findings are organized into five broad sections: first, the ways in which library leaders conceptualize and understand emotional labour; second, library leaders’ approaches to leadership; third, how these leadership approaches align with organizational culture; fourth, perceptions of organizational care for leaders and their staff; and finally, the ways in which leaders manage the emotional dimensions of their roles.

Conceptualization and Knowledge of Emotional Labour

To explore participants’ understanding of emotional labour, they were asked: When we say emotional labour in regard to work, what does that mean to you? Responses indicated that participants thought about emotional labour in various ways and described or defined emotional labour using words and phrases such as:

Balance: “The caring [about] how other people feel is where I can get out of balance with thinking that it’s my responsibility to make people happy at work. And that is not my responsibility. [But] I like to help make things better if there is a concrete thing that I can do.”

Boundaries: “It is providing and creating space for people to be feeling human beings in the work environment and to work through feelings. . . because as much as we’d like to, we can’t just shed it all at the door and then put it back at the end of the day.”

Burden: “The word burden always pops into my mind. How much are people carrying on their shoulders from their work with the public that’s maybe weighing them down or giving them issues or challenges. And how are they coping with those burdens? How are they dealing with it? How can I help?”

Emotional support: “The emotional labour of supporting staff. When you work in a public library, every patron that you see you just never know what’s going to happen. And I think a lot of the emotional labour is currently around safety and security. . . staff feeling unsafe and unsupported when dealing with patrons who pose challenges in the library.”

Emotional toll: “Emotional labour is definitely something that I have to watch out for and I am actively in therapy because of the toll my job takes on me and because of how much humanity I am seeing and dealing with and trying to be present and engaged with.”

Managing other people’s emotions: “Trying to anticipate how something will affect [staff] and trying to minimize the impact on them.”

Patience: “I do the same kind of emotional labour that everybody does who does public service, which is being patient. When someone asks you how to use the printer for the one millionth time and drawing boundaries in a polite and diplomatic way and diffusing angry patrons. For me, it has the added layer that when I’m doing all that, I know that I’m setting an example for the other staff.”

Emotional Labour as Unspoken Labour

For many participants, emotional labour represented work that was “under-appreciated and not very measurable, or [something that’s] not remunerated.” These descriptions of emotional labour were summarized by one library leader who noted that emotional labour required them to “take on all that had happened at work and keep it and hold it in.” Responses to this question also emphasized the tension that currently exists in working with the public and many of the non-traditional aspects of public library work. For example,

The real labour was that tension between a safe and welcoming space and management of behaviour. That’s where I see the emotional labour - wanting to be welcoming [and] ensure that everyone is included. . . and at the same time, recognizing that these are our biggest challenges that maybe can never be completely reconciled. That’s the space where emotional labour really lives.

Another participant described emotional labour as “the unspoken, unrecognized, often ill-defined work that staff end up doing very frequently to support patrons who have some sort of social need that they’re turning to the library to meet . . . the big and nebulous bucket of non-information service that we provide to people.” For many participants, emotional labour carried negative connotations, something seen as “under-appreciated and not very measurable,” or “not remunerated.” One library leader summarized it as having to “take on all that had happened at work and keep it and hold it in.”

Middle Management Syndrome

Participants described their middle management roles as central to their emotional labour experiences. Navigating the competing expectations of frontline staff, upper management, and patrons placed them in an in-between role that often would require constant emotional regulation and mediation. This recurring theme highlighted how many leaders understood emotional labour as intrinsic to their position rather than a personal burden. Participants reported being caught between competing expectations, often without recognition: “I feel like I am constantly giving,” and “I feel kind of replaceable.” One described the role as being the “hinge between frontline staff and leadership” and another noted the high emotional labour output caused by “patron complaints and staff complaints. . . [as well as] the emotional labour above me and [being available] for my peers when they need help.”

While participants acknowledged that their peers and direct leaders cared, many believed the organization itself was indifferent, noting that the library “can just continue ticking along without me.” Others noted their efforts were undervalued: “we’re the link between policy and staff, so we get it from both sides. We deliver big changes staff don’t like and listen to staff concerns that we can’t change.” Middle managers also bore the emotional burden of supporting staff while managing daily operations: “My position does so much emotional labour because all of it comes from staff. It’s exhausting and undervalued.” Similarly, “upper management doesn’t see how their decisions affect us. They push changes like adding Sunday hours without addressing staffing needs.” Several described the mental load of navigating communication between staff and leadership: “A lot of what I do is making judgment calls . . . deciding which staff complaints and concerns I need to push up and how to frame them . . . when to talk about it and how to talk about it?” Chronic understaffing was another recurring concern. For example, several participants said fixing the staffing crisis would help alleviate some aspects of emotional labour because “all roads lead back to staffing.”

Participants also highlighted the performative nature of leadership: “sometimes you have to act like you’re fine because there is no one else to really share that experience within the branch.” In the absence of institutional support, peer relationships were essential: “we are not getting a lot of emotional support from our managers. So we are being that for each other.” Many described leadership as isolating, with one participant noting, “I’m with people all day and I don’t have any professional peers at my work location. . . staff here are great and I really like them, [but I] can’t really be friends with anyone. . . [which] means that the people who I could make friends with are at other branches. I don’t see them every day. Or even every week. So, that’s emotional labour too. . . or a certain emotional cost that is exacted.”

Approaches to Leadership

When asked to describe their leadership styles, participants shared diverse responses that reflected four main themes: approachability and communication, collaboration, support, and a conscious avoidance of micromanaging.

Approachability and Communication

Participants emphasized approachability and effective communication as critical leadership traits that foster trust and collaboration. Many exemplified authentic leadership characteristics, including open dialogue, listening, and relationship-building. One participant aimed to “connect on a personal level and be human beings first before the role of supervisor and supervisee.” Another prioritized being “inquiry-based and people-focused. . . having really good relationships with staff is a top priority. Trusting and open relationships and communication with my staff [is key].” Others described wanting to be approachable “when it comes to concerns, comments, suggestions” and “creat[ing] space for staff to feel comfortable coming to me with things [and know that] their opinions and feelings are completely valid.”

Collaboration

Participants frequently described collaboration as a key leadership practice. They emphasized shared decision-making and collective problem-solving, aligned with a servant leadership style. One described it as “taking a lot of different threads and weaving them together.” Another noted that “the staff often see things that I don’t.” Leaders highlighted the value of building on staff strengths: “helping to position them to do the work they need to do and grow in the ways they would like to grow.” One participant said they “try to do a course correction on top-down leadership and model transparency, accountability, and service.”

Support

Many participants saw supporting staff as a core responsibility—through encouragement, resources, and opportunities for growth. One framed their role as a servant leadership style: “My job is to make my manager successful and to make my staff successful.” Another echoed this, saying, “I am there to support them both in ensuring they have what they need to do their jobs and do them well.” A third participant described themselves as “a cheerleader [who builds] on people’s strengths and provides opportunities for them to grow.”

Avoidance of Micromanaging

Leaders also described a deliberate avoidance of micromanagement. They aimed to strike a balance in expectations between providing autonomy and offering guidance. As one said, “I really don’t like to micromanage. I trust my teams to

let me know when things are not going well.” Another added, “Clear is kind, so I ensure expectations are clear, but I hate micromanaging. I want people to have room to make decisions and use critical thinking.” One participant emphasized trust as a foundation: “[I’ve learned] to trust that staff know what they’re doing by giving them the tools they need and stepping back, but being available when needed.”

Alignment with Organizational Culture

When asked how their leadership approaches aligned with organizational culture, participants identified three key themes: hierarchical structures as barriers, lack of leadership support and development, and variability by role or location.

Hierarchy as a Barrier

Many participants described rigid, hierarchical organizational structures and risk-averse cultures that clashed with their personal leadership values. One participant said they could avoid conflict “as long as I stay on the frontline, I can kind of keep my head down” Another participant noted that “a long-standing culture of being very risk-averse” did not align with their personal leadership style, while another described a clash of cultures between newer and more “old school [leaders] who like to have a very rigid control over everything”. These tensions contributed to emotional labour and were exacerbated by differences in individual management styles, branch size or culture. Several participants noted that their leadership styles were “tailored to the community” where they adapted their approaches to specific contexts, but ongoing misalignment with organizational values made this challenging. This often resulted in increased emotional labour for leaders trying to uphold their values within unsupportive systems.

Lack of Support for Development

Many leaders reported insufficient preparation and a lack of structured support for transitioning from frontline roles into management or leadership positions. One participant noted, “until very recently there has been nothing in place to help the transition,” and another added, “I haven’t been instructed a whole lot on how to be a manager.” Even those with informal leadership roles, like a librarian without a supervisor title, felt the absence of support despite having leadership responsibilities. These gaps in support and development opportunities for new library leaders may lead to increased emotional labour requirements for people in these roles.

Perceptions of organizational care for leaders and their staff

Participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which they felt their organizations cared about them and their staff members. Most participants paused to consider their answers

before answering, suggesting that they needed time to reflect on where their sense of value originates. Many comments began as positive statements, but then went on to describe an absence of attention to the complexities and demands of the work. Participants generally felt a strong connection to their direct supervisors, but expressed feeling undervalued by senior leaders or the organization more generally, leading to feelings of discontent. Uneven organizational support and a disconnect between senior leadership and frontline staff are also explored in this section.

Strong Direct Leadership

Participants often felt supported by their immediate supervisors, calling them “supportive and approachable.” One shared, “I know my suggestions and ideas are usually welcome,” while another described their manager as “one of the most supportive” despite limited on-site presence. Several participants highlighted exceptional leadership, specifically praising visionary qualities and personal connection: “when they speak with you, they see you, and they are all about you, and that is really quite remarkable.” Participants also noted progress in recognizing emotional labour, with new training initiatives and policies emerging after traumatic events. As one said, “we are getting to a place where there is an acknowledgment that to have a resilient workforce... we have to not be in crisis mode all the time.” Another participant noted recent progress in this area, stating, “we are just now. . . putting some structures and training in place to really acknowledge that [emotional labour] an important part of our roles.”

This may be in response to the increase in serious events in public libraries, which required the organization to do more. For example, “there have been several big incidents that were frankly traumatic, and I think they’ve really stepped up their efforts to help to try and provide things for staff.”

Gaps in Upper Leadership Support

In contrast, some participants did not always feel supported by upper management or more senior leaders, who may be disconnected from the day-to-day operations. As one participant stated, “I feel supported by my manager... but I don’t feel the same support from executive leadership.” Others empathized with overstretched supervisors who “have so much on their plate managing multiple branches, and can’t provide the emotional support I need, leaving me to deal with everything alone.” Executive decisions were seen as disconnected from frontline realities and exacerbating the challenges associated with emotional labour. As one stated, “we’re not even allowed to leave the branch during breaks, which makes it hard to disengage from the environment” or “decisions like opening all branches on Sundays without adding staff show a disregard for our workload.” Another participant believed that “if leadership worked a day in the life at a local library, they’d

better understand the interactions with vulnerable populations and the emotional toll.”

Inconsistent Organizational Support

Many participants described organizational care as inconsistent or lacking. One said emotional labour is not acknowledged and it “depends on who in upper management you’re working with,” while another compared it to “an app running in the background—always expected but never valued.” Others felt the organization prioritized institutional goals over staff well-being: “It was clear that management prioritized goals over addressing burnout.” These insights point to a systemic gap in acknowledging and addressing emotional labour across staff levels.

Support for Managing the Emotional Dimensions of Library Work

The final theme explores how library leaders support staff in navigating the emotional demands of their roles. Participants described strategies such as presence and availability, debriefing and validation, follow-up check-ins, psychological safety structures, and modelling boundary-setting.

Leadership Presence and Availability

Participants emphasized the value of being physically present and engaging with staff. For example, one noted they were “always walking around, checking in with staff,” which was also described as “managing by walking”, or creating “a space where [the staff] know they can talk to me. . . by being present on the floor, walking around regularly and chatting with people.” Others shared how these small, everyday acts—“just wandering around, asking a question, helping someone”—fostered approachability and a supportive culture.

Debriefing and Emotional Validation

Leaders encouraged staff to express and validate their emotional responses to challenging patron interactions. One participant explained: “it’s okay for you to say what you think or feel. . . you can say to a patron, ‘I’m frustrated’. But you can’t be mad or negative, right?” Another said, “any way that they’re feeling or responding, I like to make sure that they know that that’s valid.” Debriefing, both formal and informal, was commonly used: “as part of a regular expectation when incidents happen.” One leader described meeting staff in private “to really listen to and validate their feelings.”

Checking in Beyond the Immediate Incident

Debriefing immediately after an incident was considered by these leaders to be important - acknowledging the interaction and supporting their staff. However, support wasn’t

limited to the immediate aftermath of an incident. One participant described “giving it a couple of days and just checking in again to say, ‘Hey, I’ve been thinking about you.’” Another emphasized multiple check-ins: “if it is a challenging situation, I try to do it a few times, paced out.” These ongoing conversations were sometimes paired with referrals: “I give them the [employee assistance program] resources and tell them, ‘this is for the coming days, because your opinion about how things went and how you feel can change.’” Leaders viewed themselves as a key link to available internal and external support.

Organizational Support and Psychological Safety

Participants also highlighted broader organizational efforts, such as policies, training and formal guidance, which can foster a psychologically safe workplace. One noted “a committee that has been coaching leadership on how to support staff, including how to conduct debriefings,” while another emphasized training on “how to handle harassment from patrons in particular.” Creating team cohesion was also emphasized: “staff feeling safe as a member of our team. . . creates a psychologically safe environment [in those public service roles].” These strategies can reduce the burden of emotional labour, particularly when library staff experience a challenging or difficult patron interaction.

Setting Boundaries in Public Service

Participants reflected on the growing need for boundary-setting in response to increased safety and security concerns. The theme of establishing and maintaining boundaries was referenced several times. One said staff needed “the confidence to set boundaries and know that it is okay to do that. . . to say no. We have become anything and everything, so being able to know the scope of our roles” is essential. Another echoed this: “I tell my staff they can always walk away and get someone else and take themselves out of the situation.” Leaders noted that modelling and supporting boundary-setting helps normalize it as part of self-preservation in emotionally taxing roles.

Discussion

Conceptualization and Knowledge of Emotional Labour

The role of library staff, from the perspective of these library leaders, is increasingly demanding, and they cite a growing emotional toll linked to the rising complexity and intensity of their roles. This aligns with recent research documenting heightened emotional strain among library workers (Feuerstein-Simon et al., 2022; Garner et al., 2021; Ogden & Williams, 2022; Wahler, 2023). Participants recognized the underappreciated nature of library work, one referring to it as “unspoken, unrecognized, often ill-defined work”. Their reflections align with recent recommendations for libraries

to adopt trauma-informed practices (Wahler, 2023) that may help mitigate the negative impact of emotional labour by establishing clear boundaries around service expectations.

Participants in this study demonstrated numerous understandings of the term *emotional labour* and acknowledged that they engage in it continuously—both in their interactions with patrons and in supporting their own staff. These leaders described it as the ongoing responsibility of ensuring the emotional well-being of those around them, staff and patrons, often at the expense of their own emotions. This frequently involved internalizing emotional strain without release; as one participant described, they had to “take on all that had happened at work and keep it and hold it in.” While some of these descriptions reflect general emotional experiences at work, they also point to the emotional regulation and suppression characteristic of emotional labour. This notion of emotional containment illustrates a key characteristic of emotional labour in leadership roles: its cumulative and often unacknowledged toll. It also highlights how intertwined emotional intelligence, emotions at work, and emotional labour are, especially as library leaders describe their experiences. While leaders facilitated emotional processing for their teams, they frequently lacked structures for their own support, reinforcing the recursive nature of emotional labour in middle management. Matteson and Miller (2014) highlighted the multifaceted role of library managers, emphasizing that emotional labour is embedded at every level of the organization.

Approaches to Leadership

Leaders in this study consistently demonstrated authentic leadership through empathy, fairness, and support during difficult situations. They emphasized trust, open communication, and safe spaces for staff—core traits of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2009; McAuliffe et al., 2019). Acting as buffers between staff and the organization, they modelled empathetic responses aligned with deep acting, which helps reduce emotional labour’s negative effects (Hur et al., 2013). Modelling surface and deep acting techniques is emotional labour. Demonstrating how to respond to difficult situations is not simply about emotions at work or emotional intelligence, it is an emotional regulation that must occur as a result of organizational and customer expectations and dictated by these leaders’ roles in their organizations. Their “lead by example” approach, often rooted in frontline experience and their own emotional intelligence, reflected transparency and fairness, strengthening staff trust and building resilience (Erickson, 2021; Gardner et al., 2009; Martin, 2019).

Many also demonstrated servant leadership through collaboration and empowerment (Lo et al., 2020). Their mindset—“what do I need to do to help you become successful?”—encouraged deep acting and helped mitigate emotional strain (Lu et al., 2019). Participants emphasized that collaboration plays a key role in reducing the burdens of

emotional labour. Their leadership practices—availability, debriefing, and regular check-ins—also constituted invisible emotional labour, a form of care work often unrecognized by the broader organization. This complexity aligns with the servant leadership style, as the servant role itself may be undervalued or overlooked. Their combined use of authentic and servant leadership aligns with research showing these styles help reduce compassion fatigue, burnout, and low morale—fostering resilience and promoting a healthier organizational culture (Erickson, 2021; Martin, 2019).

Support for Managing Emotional Dimensions of Library Roles

Leaders respond quickly to negative situations, offering individual, organizational, and emotional support through formal procedures like incident reports and debriefings, as well as check-ins and time for decompression. However, these measures sometimes fall short, especially when challenges extend beyond a supervisor's control, such as the inability for staff to leave after a traumatic incident. Staff wellness support is often too generic, and inadequate staffing limits time away from the desk. In response, leaders prioritize flexibility, allowing staff to define their own recovery needs. One leader encourages staff to consider, "What do you need to reestablish your equilibrium?" Matteson and Miller's (2013) framework shows how leaders can cultivate a workplace that acknowledges emotional labour challenges at all levels of the organization. The leaders in this study demonstrate this by minimizing emotional labour's toll while prioritizing staff mental well-being.

These leaders emphasize creating a "climate of authenticity" (Matteson & Miller, 2015, p. 104) to help staff manage emotional labour. They derive their sense of value from the people they lead more than the organization, and by listening and empowering staff, they help prevent low morale (Weyant et al., 2021a). This support is particularly important given the emotional toll of increased safety concerns and responsibilities related to societal issues like drug overdoses (Feuerstein-Simon et al., 2022).

At times, leaders felt disconnected from upper management's direction, lacking insight into the organization's broader vision. Matteson and Miller (2014) stress that the negative effects of emotional labour are mitigated when employees feel supported. Leaders who embrace authentic leadership also foster deeper emotional regulation strategies, such as deep acting, which reduces work-related stress (Wang & Xie, 2020). These leaders recognize the role of emotion at work and act as buffers to protect staff from emotional strain, even as they bear a similar burden without adequate support from above.

Boundary-setting is key to managing emotional labour, particularly in high-stress environments. Establishing boundaries prevents burnout and aligns with trauma-informed prac-

tice (Wahler, 2023), helping staff distinguish between professional roles and personal well-being. Leaders who model boundary-setting support long-term resilience in their teams.

Alignment with Organizational Culture

Library leadership alignment with organizational culture is influenced by hierarchical structures, shifting institutional priorities, and inconsistencies in leadership support and development. Emotional labour in library workplaces is shaped by leadership that promotes trust, equity, and respectful communication (Glusker et al., 2022). Participant interviews revealed that rigid corporate systems often create a risk-averse environment, limiting leadership flexibility.

Some participants noted a gradual improvement in alignment through greater emphasis on empathy and inclusivity, aligning with research on emotional intelligence as central to supportive workplace culture (Kreitz, 2009; Martin, 2019; Martin, 2020). The authentic leadership traits they described help build trust and ease emotional regulation burdens (Gardner et al., 2009; Kiersch & Byrne, 2015). This empathetic leadership can foster a "group self-consciousness" (McAuliffe et al., 2019, p. 143), creating safer spaces for staff expression. Leaders should continue these practices to support emotional labour.

Several leaders expressed uncertainty about organizational direction, pointing to the need for clearer vision and leadership development. Middle managers in particular reported feeling underprepared, reinforcing calls for structured support (Shih et al., 2014; Weyant et al., 2021b). Variability in alignment across branches and roles further suggests that workplace culture is not consistent system wide. These findings support prior research on the value of leadership development and emotional intelligence in cultivating supportive, culturally aligned leadership (Matteson et al., 2021; Weyant et al., 2021a).

Limitations

While this study includes a relatively large dataset for qualitative research, the findings are not representative of all public library leaders' experiences, nor are they universally transferable to all library settings. The use of a voluntary sampling method, which resulted in 27 qualified interviewees, may have introduced selection bias. Participants were not evenly distributed across genders, libraries, geographic locations, or leadership levels, limiting the study's breadth. Additionally, voluntary participation may have attracted leaders who already prioritize authenticity and communication, potentially excluding those with different leadership approaches. As a result, the study may not capture the perspectives of leaders who do not actively identify with these values.

Recommendations

To address the growing emotional and operational challenges in public libraries, organizations must take a proactive and system-level approach to emotional labour. These recommendations are intended for consideration by those who play a key role in implementing the necessary, system-level changes to support staff well-being and effective emotional labour management, primarily organizational leadership and upper management.

Enhanced Support for Middle Management

Middle managers bear a disproportionate share of emotional labour. Organizations should:

- Provide targeted leadership training that prepares them for the emotional demands of their roles.
- Establish mentorship or peer support networks to facilitate shared learning and coping strategies.
- Acknowledge the dual pressures faced by middle managers and ensure institutional supports are in place to address role strain and emotional fatigue.

Recognize Emotional Labour as a Collective Responsibility

Emotional labour should not be an individual burden. Libraries should:

- Promote a culture where emotional labour is acknowledged as a shared organizational responsibility.
- Implement policies and practices that acknowledge the emotional demands placed on library staff and leaders.
- Update human resources practices and implement new approaches to recruitment, screening, and interviews that acknowledge the emotional labour components of public library work.
- Consider the role of library managers and leadership in setting expectations around emotional labour for library staff and how these expectations create complex obligations to customer care.

Implement Emotional Labour Training

Training on emotional labour should be embedded across the organization. Key actions include:

- Educating staff on core concepts such as surface and deep acting.
- Differentiating between emotional labour, emotional intelligence, and emotions at work and educating staff on how these concepts are related, but unique.

- Offering workshops on emotional regulation techniques, particularly for frontline staff and supervisors.
- Providing resources that normalize discussion and offer coping strategies.
- Establishing designated spaces for decompression and recovery within the workplace, especially to support newer staff and mitigate the impact of emotional exhaustion.

Promote Authentic Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

Emotionally intelligent leaders who embody authentic leadership traits enhance staff well-being and organizational health. Libraries should:

- Prioritize leadership development that values transparency, empathy, and fairness, the cornerstones of authentic leadership.
- Train leaders to model emotionally supportive behaviors and deep acting strategies, while recognizing that these strategies are themselves acts of emotional labour.
- Recognize and reward leadership that builds a psychologically safe and emotionally supportive culture.

Conclusion

The demands of public library work have intensified, placing significant strain not only on frontline staff but also on the leaders responsible for supporting them. Emotional labour is happening laterally, upward, and downward for the leaders in this study. They play a crucial role as middle managers, navigating a delicate balancing act between addressing their staff's well-being and meeting organizational expectations. As authentic leaders, they strive to build meaningful emotional connections with their teams—often successfully—but this connection comes at a cost. Despite their commitment, these leaders have little power to change systemic challenges such as precarious work conditions, chronic understaffing, and the increasing pressures of societal crises. These realities demand a high level of emotional labour, requiring leaders to remain composed in the face of chaos. Without adequate support, the emotional strain on both staff and leaders will only continue to escalate, increasing stress, emotional exhaustion, and, perhaps most concerning, burnout. Addressing these growing demands requires a collective effort. Emotional labour is a burden that cannot be carried alone, nor can its effects be ignored. Libraries must take a proactive approach to managing emotional labour—one that prioritizes leadership development, shared responsibility, and comprehensive organizational support. By doing so, libraries can create a sustainable, psychologically safe work environment where both staff and leaders can thrive.

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