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Authors

Emmelhainz, Celia
Pappas, Erin
Seale, Maura

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BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THE MOMMY LIBRARIAN: THE SUCCESSFUL REFERENCE TRANSACTION AS EMOTIONAL LABOR

Celia Emmelhainz, Erin Pappas, and Maura Seale

“Now girls, I want you to go out there and really *smile*. Your smile is your biggest *asset*. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. *Really* smile. Really *lay it on*.”¹

“While not every query will be of interest to the librarian, the librarian should embrace each patron’s informational need and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Librarians who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users.”²

Every librarian³ who has worked with the public probably has stories about challenging patrons: the one who critiqued the librarian’s typing skills, the one who asked if the librarian was pregnant (she was not), the aggressive patron, the know-it-all patron, the crying patron, the stalker patron. Each time, the librarian is expected to answer the

1 Delta Airlines Trainer, quoted in Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 4. Emphasis in original.

2 “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers,” Reference & User Services Association, 1996/2013, <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>.

3 Although everyone who works at a public service point may not technically be an MLIS-holding librarian, we follow the RUSA *Guidelines* and use “librarian” to refer to anyone who provides “reference and informational services directly to library users” (RUSA, *Guidelines*), and similarly note that this discussion is not limited to the reference desk, but applies to “any type of reference interaction” (RUSA, *Guidelines*).

patron's reference question to the best of her ability, and to do so with a smile, or with at least the bare minimum of civility.

In this chapter, we consider how reference librarians are explicitly taught to center their work on the performance of emotional labor through the Reference & User Services Association / RUSA's "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers" (hereafter *Guidelines*). Using a discourse analysis of the *Guidelines*, we uncover the expectation that librarians perform authentic emotional labor in reference interactions and highlight the ways in which such expectations are gendered. We begin with a qualitative content analysis of how often emotional labor is mentioned in the *Guidelines*, then move on to a close reading of these guidelines for librarian interactions with the public. As we show below, the *Guidelines* serve three distinct purposes: first, they act as a professional litmus test through which any employer may assess the outward performance of a reference librarian; second, they provide a set of aspirational standards for the ideal reference encounter; and finally, they set explicit expectations for professional behavioral labor that the librarian should, over time, internalize as her own authentic feelings.⁴

EMOTIONAL LABOR AND THE LIBRARY: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Managed Heart by Arlie Hochschild is the foundational work on emotional labor. In this key text, Hochschild contrasts an extensive qualitative study of (mostly female) flight attendants with a smaller study of bill collectors, framing the discussion around *emotional labor*, as when she argues that the flight attendant:

[I]s also doing something more, something I define as *emotional labor*. This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and

⁴ We use "she" as the pronoun for "librarian" as librarianship is unquestionably dominated by women. When we use "women," we include anyone who presents or identifies as a woman. We follow Judith Butler in understanding gender as fluid, constructed, and performative, rather than as binary and fixed. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.⁵

As Hochschild notes, the harnessing of emotion to evoke a certain state of feeling in another person may occur in private contexts as well.⁶ Yet when compensated labor is involved, the tenor of emotional work changes. We adopt Hochschild's terminology here:

I use the term *emotional labor* to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value. I use the synonymous terms *emotion work* or *emotion management* to refer to these same acts done in a private context.⁷

Further research has considered the cognitive, emotional, and psychological effects of emotional labor in the service professions.⁸ This literature on emotional labor can easily be applied to the work done by public service librarians.⁹ Multiple scholars make the argument that

5 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 6-7.

6 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*. See also: Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Nicole Molé, *Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy: Mobbing, Well-Being, and the Workplace* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Andrea Muehlebach, "On Affective Labor in Post-Fordist Italy," *Cultural Anthropology* 26 no. 1 (2011): 59-82; Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

7 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 7. Emphasis in original.

8 Karla A. Erickson, *The Hungry Cowboy: Service and Community in a Neighborhood Restaurant*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Alicia Grandey, Su Chuen Foo, Markus Groth and Robyn E. Goodwin, "Free to Be You and Me: A Climate of Authenticity Alleviates Burnout from Emotional Labor," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 17 no. 1 (2012): 1-14; Mary Ellen Guy and Meredith A. Newman, "Women's Jobs, Men's Jobs: Sex Segregation and Emotional Labor," *Public Administration Review* 64 no. 3 (May 2004): 289-298; Ute Hülshager and Anna F. Schewe, "On the Costs and Benefits of Emotional Labor: A Meta-Analysis of Three Decades of Research," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 16 no. 3 (2011): 361-389; Sharon O'Dair, "Superservicable Subordinates, Universal Access, and Prestige-Driven Research," in *Over Ten Million Served: Gendered Service in Language and Literature Workplaces*, ed. Michelle A. Massé and Katie J. Hogan (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Amy Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

9 Celene Seymour, "Ethnographic Study of Information Literacy Librarians' Work Experience: A Report from Two States," in *Transforming Information Literacy Programs: Intersecting Frontiers of Self, Library Culture, and Campus Community*, ed. Carroll W. Wilkinson and Courtney Bruch (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015).

emotional labor is a key aspect of labor within the library,¹⁰ whether this takes place in library instruction, at the circulation desk, or during the reference encounter.¹¹

Although librarianship is predominantly female, the scholarly literature has yet to consider the role of gender in our expectations for emotional performance as librarians and in our experiences of emotional labor. Lisa Slonowski critiques immaterial labor, situating it within feminist, Marxist, post-Fordist, and post-Structuralist paradigms; in the context of higher education, the affective work performed by academic librarians easily falls within that sphere.¹² Miriam L. Matteson and Shelly S. Miller similarly recommend research into how gendered emotional labor is performed in librarianship, an especially important topic given that they report women experience more stress in undertaking emotional labor than men do.¹³ From a service perspective, Nancy Fried Foster calls attention to the professional model of service that inheres in the *Guidelines*, as well as the internalized norms of full customer service in general.¹⁴ Sherianne Schuler and Nathan Morgan, as well as Matteson

10 Kathryn Arbuckle, "Emotion and Knowledge: Partners in Library Service?" *Feliciter* 54, no. 5 (2008): 219-221; Miriam L. Matteson and Shelly S. Miller. "Emotional Labor in Librarianship: A Research Agenda," *Library and Information Science Research* 34 no. 3 (2012): 176-183; Miriam L. Matteson and Shelly S. Miller. "A Study of Emotional Labor in Librarianship," *Library & Information Science Research* 35 no.1 (January 2013): 54-62; Miriam L. Matteson and Shelly S. Miller. "What Library Managers Should Know about Emotional Labor," *Public Library Quarterly* 33 no. 2 (2014): 95-107; Miriam L. Matteson, Sharon Chittock, and David Mease, "In Their Own Words: Stories of Emotional Labor from the Library Workforce," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 85 no. 1 (2015): 85-105; Yu-Ping Peng, "Buffering the Negative Effects of Surface Acting: The Moderating Role of Supervisor Support in Librarianship," *Journal Of Academic Librarianship* 41 no. 1 (January 2015): 37-46.

11 Heidi Julien and Shelagh K. Genuis, "Emotional Labor in Librarians' Instructional Work," *Journal of Documentation* 65 no. 6 (2009): 926-937; Chen Su-May Sheih, "A Survey of Circulation Librarians' Emotional Labor and Emotional Exhaustion: The Case of Difficult Patron Service in University Libraries," *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences* 50 no. 1 (Fall 2012): 5-39; Sherianne Shuler and Nathan Morgan, "Emotional Labor in the Academic Library: When Being Friendly Feels Like Work," *The Reference Librarian* 54 no. 2 (2013): 118-133.

12 Lisa Slonowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," *Library Trends* 64 no. 4 (Spring 2016): 645-666.

13 Matteson and Miller, "Emotional Labor in Librarianship: A Research Agenda."

14 Nancy Fried Foster, "The Mommy Model of Service," in *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*, ed. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007).

and Miller, specifically note the *Guidelines* as a place where the often underspecified practices which make up emotional labor are codified—yet do not analyze the gendered ideas embedded in them.¹⁵ And to presage some practical or applied solutions for those who are now thoroughly depressed, Matteson and Miller suggest strategies of deep acting, reframing, and mindfulness to help librarians cope with the ongoing social expectations of emotional labor in our workplaces.¹⁶

METHODS: CONTENT ANALYSIS AND CLOSE READING

In thinking through the expectations of emotional labor in reference work, we became interested in how the *Guidelines* implicitly and explicitly codify emotional labor as a normal part of any reference interaction. Although the *Guidelines* set up a reference encounter as occurring free of context, circumstance, or qualification, these same guidelines locate the success of the interaction in the (female) librarian's successful performance of emotional labor. Our analysis of the *Guidelines* shows that personal and emotional labor is both expected and reproduced in each reference encounter, which is nominally framed as an abstract interaction between the librarian and a person seeking information. After our initial review and discussion of the *Guidelines*, we follow Jeffery L. Loo and Elizabeth A. Dupuis in coding emergent themes with *qualitative content analysis*,¹⁷ using a spreadsheet to open code every guideline against a set of themes which emerged from the text as a whole (See figure 1).

By coding recurring themes in columns, as above, we could estimate the proportion of the *Guidelines* that reinforced expectations of emotional labor, as well as observe particular subsets of embodied or affective labor that are expected of librarians.

However, estimates of theme frequency do not engage deeply with the themes of the text; for this reason, we moved to a *close reading* of the text as a group. Each author drew on her experiences as a feminist,

15 Matteson and Miller, "Emotional Labor in Librarianship: A Research Agenda."; Shuler and Morgan, "Emotional Labor in the Academic Library: When Being Friendly Feels Like Work."

16 Matteson and Miller, "What Library Managers Should Know about Emotional Labor."

17 Jeffery L. Loo and Elizabeth A. Dupuis, "Organizational Learning for Library Enhancements: A Collaborative, Research-Driven Analysis of Academic Department Needs," *College & Research Libraries* 76 no. 5: (July 2015).

Number	Text from Guidelines	Approachable / Visible	Affirm, Comfort, Encourage	On their timing	Focus on them	Friendly / Bodily labor	Service Orientation
1.1.1	Is to be found in a highly visible physical or virtual location (the library, outreach locations, or the library website). Proper signage or notification that indicates the location, hours, and availability of in-person and remote assistance is available.	y		y			
1.1.2	Is poised and ready to engage patrons. The librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities when a patron approaches and focus attention on the patron's needs.			y	y		
1.1.3	Acknowledges patrons by using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation.		y			y	
1.1.4	Acknowledges others waiting for service.						y
1.1.5	Employs a system of question triage to identify questions and service priorities.			y			y
1.2.1	Establishes an approachable presence by being easily identifiable in compliance with institutional and professional norms and policies.	y					
1.2.2	Acknowledges patrons by making initial eye contact, employing open body language , or using a friendly greeting to initiate conversation.					y	
1.2.3	Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.	y					
1.2.4	Identifies patrons needing or wanting help.				y		
1.2.5	Occasionally roves through the reference or public areas offering assistance. To rove successfully, the librarian:	y					y
1.2.5.1	Uses cues, verbal or nonverbal, to determine which patrons need help, and approaches patrons and offers assistance with lines such as,	y		y			
1.2.5.2	Gets the patron started on the initial steps of his/her search, then moves on to other patrons. Offers to provide more assistance if needed.						
1.2.5.3	Checks back on the patron's progress.		y	y			y

Fig. 1. Qualitative content analysis of the RUSA Guidelines

a member of the labor force, and a reference librarian to produce a more nuanced understanding of the social origin and performative impacts of the *Guidelines*. In combining a qualitative content analysis with the practices of close reading employed in the humanities, our methods draw together the literature on emotional labor in academia, the *Guidelines*, and our own embodied experience as humans who engage in reference work within a particular set of sociocultural circumstances.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS: STEPPING INTO THE GUIDELINES WITH COMMON THEMES

Before examining each set of specific guidelines, we surveyed the themes most commonly emerging from the text as a whole. The *Guidelines* assign every introductory section and set of specific behavioral guidelines to one of five broad *categories of labor* (**visibility, showing interest, listening and inquiring, demonstrating search techniques, and follow-up**) expected of librarians engaging with

patrons in person or online. We coded each paragraph separately, resulting in 60 blocks of text which were marked with either the presence or absence of themes of 1) broad-scale emotional labor, 2) meeting patron needs, 3) offering referrals or soliciting follow-up interactions, 4) orienting to service, 5) performing an embodied friendliness, 6) keeping full focus on others, 7) accommodating the patron’s timing, 8) comforting and encouraging, and 9) being approachable. The chart below (Figure 2) summarizes how often a guideline met any of the emotional labor themes below, so that e.g. 32% of guidelines encouraged librarians to comfort and encourage patrons:

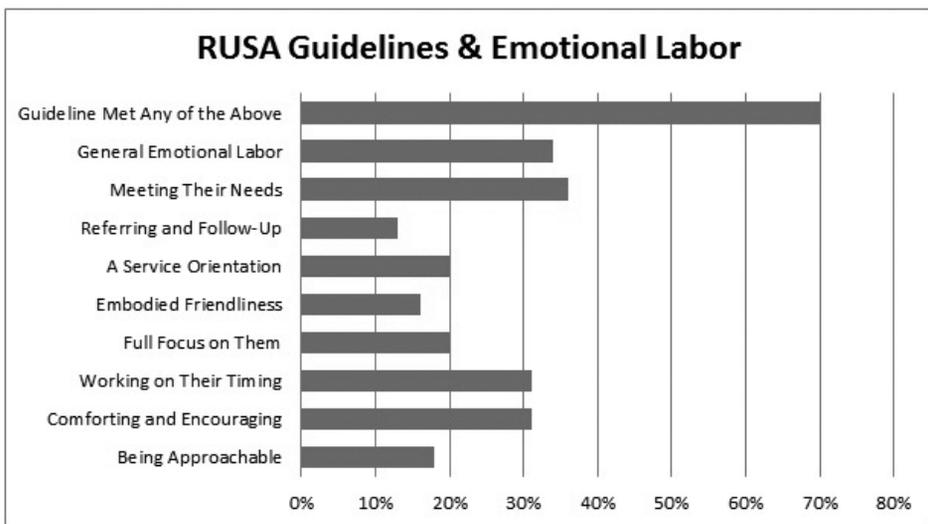


Fig. 2. RUSA Guidelines and emotional labor

Each broad theme above was found in at least 20% of the *Guidelines*, and most guidelines were coded with multiple themes resonant of emotional labor. At least 70% of the 60 text blocks demonstrated some expectation of emotional labor, whether the paragraph was ostensibly focused on search behavior, spoken words, or physical interaction. Our qualitative content analysis, then, suggests that the *Guidelines* formalize an expectation that librarians perform emotional services for other people, even as the formal nature of their work is framed as skilled research guidance or professional consultation. In the close reading that follows, we further explore the emotional content and gendered nature of these expectations for reference librarians.

CLOSE READING: THE NURTURING REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

It is not surprising that the American Library Association (ALA) and its section on reference work (RUSA) would choose to outline a successful reference interaction, as the reference interview is a repeated responsibility with some elements that can be standardized. What is arresting about the *Guidelines* is that they focus not just on the *procedure* of reference, but on the *behavior* of the librarian. This moves the *Guidelines* beyond documenting tasks (“what to do”), and into the realm of telling professionals “how to be.”

The RUSA *Guidelines* were created by an ad hoc committee, revised by the MOUSS Management of Reference Committee in 2004, and again by the RSS Management of Reference Committee in 2011.¹⁸ As these committees suggest, the *Guidelines* are not just guides for individual librarians, but also train *managers* what to look for in employees. Indeed, the goal is framed as “to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of librarians and staff who provide information.”¹⁹ The *Guidelines*, then, serve to connect the observable behavior of the librarian to whether her interactions are deemed successful or not. In this way, both her behavior and her demeanor become a site of judgment, in which “the positive or negative behavior of the librarian (as observed by the patron) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure” of the interaction.²⁰ This echoes Hochschild’s flight attendants, who were taught that “the *emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself*.”²¹

Within the *Guidelines*, librarian behavior is repeatedly articulated and evaluated in terms of attending to the *emotional* state of the patron. The set of guidelines on **Visibility/Approachability** frame the “first step” of any reference interaction as “to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation that can be perceived as intimidating, confusing, or overwhelming” (1.0). In order to provide comfort, information professionals should use “a friendly greeting” (1.1.3),

18 RUSA, *Guidelines*.

19 RUSA, *Guidelines*.

20 RUSA, *Guidelines*.

21 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 5.

“open body language” (1.2.2), and to “acknowledge” (1.1.3, 1.1.4) patrons while maintaining an “approachable presence” (1.2.1) so that people around them feel comfortable.

In the guidelines on **Interest**, emotional service intensifies. The librarian is told to “embrace each patron’s informational need” and commit to “providing the most effective assistance. Librarians who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of patrons will generate a higher level of satisfactions among users” (2.0). Once again, the goal of performing verbal or physical interest is not to form rapport and answer a question effectively, but to make patrons *feel* good and satisfied (presumably in a way that can be quantified in later assessment measures). Rather than show the natural reserve inherent to some personalities or professions, the librarian is encouraged to provide her “complete attention” (2.1.1) and “[signal] an understanding of the patron’s needs” (2.2.4) through regular backchannel signaling of “verbal and non-verbal confirmation” (2.2.3) which indicates ongoing interest and attention as the patron talks. In this way, “seeming to ‘love the job’ becomes part of the job.”²² Here, *interest* is less about conveying a genuine interest in a fascinating question, and more about performing a demonstrative fascination so that a patron can experience “genuine” interest.

In the third section, **Listening/Inquiring**, the librarian is made further responsible for a patron’s emotions. She is asked to identify information needs “in a manner that puts the patron at ease” (3.0), and to ensure all her communications remain “receptive, cordial, and supportive” (3.1.1). She is asked to “clarify confusing terminology and [avoid] jargon” (3.1.6), again showing consideration for the patron. Our critiques here are not of any particular recommendation, given that all of these are good professional practice for public services in general. Rather, it is with the implications, specifically regarding the covert consequences, that a prescriptive set of guidelines may have for a feminized profession as a whole.

Finally, the section on **Searching** is similarly framed around responding to and managing a patron’s emotional needs. The introduction reminds us of the affective aspect of research, as when a search is not effective, “patrons may become discouraged,” but seems to then place the responsibility for the patron’s emotional and

²² Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 6.

technical skills with the librarian: “Many aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are dependent on the behavior of the librarian” (4.0). This section is of particular interest insofar as it collapses the distinction between the technical skills of the librarian and her ability to perform emotional labor. The mechanical act of searching—as well as the intellectual knowledge of resources and methods likely to produce results—becomes conflated with the patron’s own capacity to self-regulate and manage their emotions. Throughout the process, the information professional is asked to “encourage” the patron as well as to focus less on whether the patron obtained needed information, and more on whether they are “satisfied with the results of the search” (5.0). One would expect the product of a reference interaction to be positive rapport and a more informed and educated patron; instead, “the product is a state of mind.”²³ The end user is taught to value the successful search not as one that produces an accurate result, but as one where all their potentially negative feelings are mitigated.

Throughout each reference transaction, then, the librarian is asked to focus on the *emotions* of the patron while simultaneously suppressing any emotions of her own—a textbook example of emotional labor in the service professions. She is also explicitly reminded that her *behavior* and not her *expertise* is what determines the success of an interaction and her subsequent success in the profession. If her response “sets the tone for the entire communication process” (1.0), then her normal emotional and interpersonal needs must always be subsumed or reframed to meet the needs of another. As she manages many other responsibilities or projects, as well as the normal ups and downs of a personal life, and the complex tenor of interactions between colleagues and supervisors, the librarian is also asked to perform additional labor: to always be approachable, always visible, always “poised and ready to engage patrons” (1.1.2). To be so attuned to others, of course, she is encouraged to tune out from herself, as she is “aware of the need to stop all other activities when a patron approaches and [to] focus attention on the patron’s needs” (1.1.2). In this way, the white-collar professional comes to resemble what modern-day North Americans expect of service professionals: a stewardess, a waitress, or even a mother.

²³ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 6.

This set of *Guidelines* for professionals also, ironically, discourages the librarian from offering interpretations or value judgments of her own. A successful librarian “demonstrates a high degree of objective, nonjudgmental interest” (2.0), “an understanding of the patron’s need” (2.3.3), “objectivity” (3.1.9), and avoids “value judgments” (3.1.9). She provides her “complete attention” (2.1.1) and “assurance” (2.3.2) to the user’s perspective. Her genuine level of interest and professional assessment are made irrelevant. As a blank slate, she is asked to assume neutrality in order to further support the patron’s own development. These expectations to be approachable, receptive, polite, supportive, encouraging, and attuned to patrons as well as social norms all require the librarian to suppress her own emotions, needs, and evaluations of her environment, managing competing priorities with no evident strain or stress. The *Guidelines*, in other words, articulate reference interviews as a human interaction in which one party sets herself aside in order to address other humans’ emotional and developmental needs.

And in many libraries, this is all performed in public. The intense *visibility* expected of a librarian further reinforces the gendered labor at the heart of the *Guidelines*. As Iris Marion Young argues:

[T]he woman lives her body as object as well as subject... An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon... as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.²⁴

In a patriarchal culture, women’s bodies—and so their approachability and visibility—are seen as belonging to the public or to another person, rather than to the woman as autonomous agent. Even if this understanding of woman as visual object is not intended by the *Guidelines*, they reinforce “a high level of visibility” (1.0) for a woman that is “approachable” (1.0), “poised and ready” (1.1.1), and “easily identifiable” (1.2.1), and who makes “eye contact,” focuses “complete attention” (2.1.1) on strangers, and uses “open body language” (1.2.2)—even in potentially threatening public spaces. All of this reinforces the idea that librarians’ embodied presence exists in large part to meet the emotional needs of others.

24 Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 44.

In reading these guidelines, the curious librarian may rightly ask: where is the patron's responsibility for behavior, emotional resilience in the face of setbacks, and self-management? Where is their responsibility for containing outbursts or being courteous to service professionals who cannot easily leave a dehumanizing or abusive interaction? Under these guidelines, the *librarian* is the sole key to the success or failure of the interaction, and she must behave and emote in the right ways. A librarian's objectivity and interest is of course a great asset—yet when she erases her own needs, emotions, and opinions, the ideal reference interaction appears to occur in a perfected, Stepfordian void, outside the real messiness of the social world. It is curious that a librarian's performance of *approachability* only counts when judged sufficient by highly variable patrons with highly variable motives. Her *interest* could be borne out of her own internal sense of professional pride, autonomy and integrity²⁵ — yet is instead judged by the patron. The librarian is to be a “good communicator” (3.0), yet communication is fundamentally interpersonal, dyadic, and interactive. If it happens between two people, then why do both parties not bear responsibility for the successful outcome? In many human interactions, cultural expectations are laid out for all parties. But the result of the *Guidelines* is the impression that a patron's role is to *perceive* and *feel*, while the librarian's is to provide the right *feeling* and *presence*.

The challenge, of course, is that patron behavior and perceptions do not exist in a vacuum devoid of social or cultural contexts. Like all interactions, the librarian-patron interaction is embedded in multiple matrices of context, with no one given outcome or interpretation. As Anne Boring, Kellie Ottoboni, and Philip B. Stark have shown, gender bias figures heavily in student perceptions of professors and other academic authority figures.²⁶ Jennifer L. Bonnet and Benjamin McAlexander further show that “patrons do consider demographic categories such as gender, age, and race when assessing the

25 Barry Schwartz, *Why We Work* (New York: TED Books, 2015).

26 Anne Boring, Kellie Ottoboni, and Philip B. Stark, “Student Evaluations of Teaching (Mostly) Do Not Measure Teaching Effectiveness,” *ScienceOpen Research*: 2016, accessed June 20, 2017, doi: 10.14293/S2199-1006.1.SOR-EDU.AETBZC.v1

approachability of reference librarians”²⁷ Consequently, the librarian’s gender plays into patron perceptions of how successful a reference interaction has been. How, then, can a librarian be made responsible for the emotive success of a reference interaction, if evaluations of her professional success are influenced by the gendered social roles expected of her?

In the end, then, even these carefully ordered guidelines cannot avoid the messiness of the social world. On the surface, the *Guidelines* describe a neutral reference interaction in a neutral space — yet their descriptions of the reference ideal are pervaded by gendered language and ideas. We take for granted that people in this female service profession will provide gendered emotional labor — and indeed our analysis found that over 70% of the *Guidelines* explicitly prescribed one of the nine themes indicating emotional labor. What’s more, the emotional labor required of the reference librarian in the *Guidelines* is uncanny in its resemblance to the emotional labor required of mothers, girlfriends, wives, hostesses, and servers, and flight attendants. In each of these gendered roles, women are hired “because they are seen as members of the category from which mothers come... are asked to look out for psychological needs more than men are. The world turns to women for mothering, and this fact silently attaches itself to many a job description.”²⁸ In both personal and professional roles, American women are obliged to manage the emotions of others, to satisfy the needs of others, and above all to conform to subtly gendered social norms and cues.²⁹ It is women—90% of librarians—who are asked to ensure that other human beings feel safe, supported, and nurtured—often by serving as “protomothers.”³⁰ In the *Guidelines*’ ideal reference interaction, a librarian has sole responsibility for the patron’s happiness and satisfaction. The expectation of fulfillment of neutral information requests by a nurturing reference librarian mirrors the expectations that a wife, mother, or girlfriend must sympathetically

27 Jennifer L. Bonnet, and Benjamin McAlexander, “Structural Diversity in Academic Libraries: A Study of Librarian Approachability,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 38, no. 5 (2012): 284.

28 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 170.

29 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 20.

30 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 176.

listen to a person's troubles and feelings while meeting their other needs—and all the while affirming their essential validity.

We arrive at a strange tension here, between how the ALA and other advocates assert the librarian's *authority* as a professional librarian, and how the *Guidelines* de-emphasize that same expertise and skill so that a patron may *feel* self-sufficient, comfortable, capable, powerful, and smart. As the *Guidelines* frame it, the ideal interaction is not about challenging patrons to think differently or teaching them the skills to be self-sufficient. Instead, it is about making them think they did the work themselves, and leaving them satisfied with the provision of ongoing service. Here, the *Behavioral Guidelines* evoke our culture's existing behavioral guidelines for dating, for pleasing a husband, for attending to the needs of children, and for attending to the needs of customers, bosses, and colleagues. In trying to ensure that librarians perform (gendered) service adequately, the *Guidelines* arrive at a double bind: they over-articulate what the librarian should do, as though she cannot perform professional labor on her own terms. They imply that how she handles her job should be regularly scrutinized, regulated, and policed. And the *Guidelines* ultimately brush aside the educational and informational goals of a reference transaction, in order to highlight the need for a pleasantly gendered affect, emotional sensitivity to insensitive patrons, and fulfilling the needs of others, as the (female-gendered) librarian performs (gendered) emotional labor in her office or at the reference desk.

CONCLUSION: SMILING IS SUCCESS

What is the role of a reference librarian, and what is she specifically responsible for? In the memorable phrasing of Nancy Fried Foster, patrons often approach the reference desk looking for a “Mommy Librarian,” someone who can offer emotional support, reassurance, sociality, answers, and interventions at points of pain or need.³¹ In this chapter, we have considered how reference librarians are explicitly taught to foreground emotional labor in patron interactions. By focusing on how to manage patrons' emotional (rather than informational) needs, the *Guidelines* reinforce the gendered service role of reference work, and constrain the professional autonomy

31 Foster, “The Mommy Model.”

of librarians as knowledgeable and understanding facilitators of independent research. “Success” in the reference transaction is then determined by the patron, based on the librarian’s ability to manage the patron’s reactions to their experiences: not “how well did this answer your question?” but “how good did this make you feel?”

And so we come to a tension: as professionals we are aware of the interplay of education, role, gender, race, class, and past experience in every unique interaction. And yet, we still want to guide patrons well, to listen well, and to make meaningful human connections. In line with our feminist philosophy, we wish to extend an “ethics of care” to patrons and students, while caring for ourselves by calling on patrons to take full responsibility for their own actions and emotion management. An ethics of care focuses on the “relatedness of persons” rather than on people as fundamentally autonomous individuals.³²

The *Guidelines* place responsibility for the success of a reference interaction solely with the librarian, her self-conduct, and her emotional labor. By contrast, an ethics of care emphasizes that *both* the librarian and patron contribute to the success of the reference interaction, in a process similar to Goffmanian participant interaction.³³ Thus, the participants and their particular circumstances come to bear on each instance of interaction, and are wholly interdependent. In her work on feminist pedagogy, Maria Accardi notes the tension between the goal of educating and challenging students to think differently about how they inhabit the world, in stark contrast to the fact that students are not always receptive to a progressive pedagogy.³⁴ The tension between patron-centered librarianship and meaningful professional autonomy for the librarian becomes evident: if we erase ourselves, how can we be seen?

How can we advocate for the continued value of investing in libraries and librarians, when the successful interaction as outlined in the *Guidelines* has the patron believing that they’ve done it all by themselves? And perhaps some of this comes out in the process of training patrons itself. In our ideal reference interaction, patrons are

32 Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

33 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

34 Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 3.

not “passive consumers of knowledge and culture” but rather active and empowered learners.³⁵ This attitude towards learning, even in a brief encounter at the reference desk, has to be cultivated. We see a way forward in highlighting the affective dimension of *all* learning as it comes to bear on even mundane human interaction.³⁶ Only through such a process we can attend to the emotional aspect of our human selves, both by empowering the patron to take responsibility for their own emotions while searching for information, and through the self-care, autonomy, subversion, and self-definition that the feminist librarian provides to herself.

³⁵ Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy*, 25.

³⁶ Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy*, 3.

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