

Library Staff Morale Correlates with Having a Sense of Respect and Value for Their Work, Relationship to Direct Supervisors and Colleagues, and Autonomy and Flexibility in Their Work Environments

Glusker, A., Emmelhainz, C., Estrada, N., & Dyess, B. (2022). “Viewed as equals”: The impacts of library organizational cultures and management on library staff morale. *Journal of Library Administration*, 62(2), 153–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2026119>

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Volume 17, Number 4, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095267ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip30240>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Opuda, E. (2022). Review of [Library Staff Morale Correlates with Having a Sense of Respect and Value for Their Work, Relationship to Direct Supervisors and Colleagues, and Autonomy and Flexibility in Their Work Environments / Glusker, A., Emmelhainz, C., Estrada, N., & Dyess, B. (2022). “Viewed as equals”: The impacts of library organizational cultures and management on library staff morale. *Journal of Library Administration*, 62(2), 153–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2026119>]. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 17(4), 180–183. <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip30240>

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Evidence Summary

Library Staff Morale Correlates with Having a Sense of Respect and Value for Their Work, Relationship to Direct Supervisors and Colleagues, and Autonomy and Flexibility in Their Work Environments

A Review of:

Glusker, A., Emmelhainz, C., Estrada, N., & Dyess, B. (2022). "Viewed as equals": The impacts of library organizational cultures and management on library staff morale. *Journal of Library Administration*, 62(2), 153–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2026119>

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Received: 1 Sept. 2022

Accepted: 21 Oct. 2022

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DOI: [10.18438/eblip30240](https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip30240)

Abstract

Objective – To explore what library organizational factors influence library staff morale.

Design – Semi-structured interview, grounded theory.

Setting – Academic libraries across the United States during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subjects – 34 academic library staff, defined by the authors as employees whose positions do not require an MLIS degree and do not include the title "librarian", from 23 private and public colleges and universities across 16 states, mostly representative of the West and Midwest regions.

Methods – In 2020, the authors emailed a call for study participants to library listservs and state library associations across the US, selected a convenience sample of 34 library staff from academic institutions, and conducted structured interviews by phone or by Google Meet over the course of May through June 2020. The authors note that the sample over-represents public and larger institutions in the West and Midwest regions. A student worker transcribed the audio recordings and de-identified transcripts underwent iterative, thematic coding in MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool. The authors used a grounded theory approach to conduct open coding, then identified relationships between themes, and elaborated upon each theme based on its relationship to a theoretical model of morale impact avenues in library organizational structures, which was developed by one of the authors.

Main Results –The authors uncovered that most study participants (n = 21) reported having high levels of morale, a surprise to the research team who expected that participants with lower levels of morale would participate in the study. Most participants (n = 27) worked in public and larger institutions, and the majority were female (n = 24), though only 5 were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Participants mostly had MLIS degrees or other advanced degrees. The results of the study expanded beyond the original research questions to comprise a broader set of factors that impact morale levels including relationships with colleagues and direct managers, opportunities for advancement, respect, work autonomy, and funding. Respondents emphasized that staff morale was significantly impacted by their relationship with direct managers, noting that micromanagement, defensiveness, and lack of accommodations contributed to lower levels of morale and a sense of disconnection. Managers who were supportive, advocated for staff needs, and were good listeners improved morale. Relationships between staff and their librarian colleagues also impacted morale, with the librarian–staff divide and treatment of staff by librarians being major contributors to influencing morale. Additionally, staff felt that having or lacking respect from librarians and administration and having autonomy and flexibility in their work made a big impact on morale. Having opportunities to meaningfully engage, to advance in the workplace, to receive professional development funding, to participate in decision-making processes, and to feel valued by the institution contributed to higher levels of staff morale.

Conclusion – Library staff morale is impacted mostly by staff members’ sense of connection, respect, and value within the institution and among their librarian colleagues, direct managers, and library administration. Having pathways for advancement and professional development, meaningful opportunities to contribute to institutional decision-making, and autonomy over their professional and personal lives contributed to a higher sense of staff morale. The authors highlight several practical recommendations for improving staff morale including fostering a respectful environment, advocating for more flexible and better work environments, and providing opportunities for professional development and growth.

Commentary

This research article contributes to a significant gap in the library research literature on the factors that impact library staff morale. Issues of library worker morale and burnout existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, though the pandemic exacerbated these existing problems (Corrado, 2022; Hodge & Williams, 2021; Hudson-Vitale & Miller Waltz, 2020; Miller Waltz, 2021). Hodge and Williams (2021) describe the significant harm of the pandemic in combination with anti-Black racism that was finally examined in 2020 and call for library institutions to identify and address structural inequities. Corrado (2022), Hudson-Vitale and Miller Waltz (2020), and Miller Waltz (2021) offer practical suggestions on mitigating the effects of low morale and burnout due to the pandemic. Furthermore, Katopol (2016) describes the impact of burnout on developing compassion fatigue and the negative impacts on library workers’ wellbeing and work satisfaction.

This article was appraised using an adapted version of Russell and Gregory's qualitative research appraisal questions from 2003 (Suarez, 2010). While the authors identified specific and clear research questions, they acknowledge that they modified the research questions due to the richness of the qualitative data. Additionally, the authors received IRB approval of their study and selected appropriate methods for conducting the study. The appendix includes a helpful collection of all forms, questionnaires, and protocols used in the study. The authors conducted the sampling thoughtfully, though they state that BIPOC library staff members, private institutions, and the South and the Northeast were underrepresented. They indicate that more targeted research is needed to be more representative of library staff nationally. Additionally, the authors do not identify the roles of the library staff participants or explore the impact of having an MLIS or another advanced degree, which could have further contextualized the findings of the interviews. The authors pilot tested their interview questions and collected, managed, and analyzed data systematically with de-identified information.

Interview data and summary of findings are rich and thoughtfully capture the significance of strong interpersonal relationships, mutual respect, and placing value on library staff members despite their positions within an organization's hierarchy. Documenting their coding data in the findings to fully illustrate the grounded theory methodology could have increased transparency of the results. Though the authors design a theoretical model, the visual diagram illustrating the model falls short of representing the elements and relationships that they hope to convey. The overarching message of the study simply underscores the importance of treating library staff workers as valuable and equal members of a library's organization and investing in their growth and development as much as librarians. The authors uncover ways in which library staff experience low morale due to feeling undervalued, micromanaged, and treated as dispensable.

The timing of this research is unique as the authors conducted interviews in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes that emerged from data collection were likely enhanced or exacerbated by the pandemic, particularly the theme of autonomy and flexibility of the work environment. As library staff juggled new work environments and budgetary uncertainties, they also juggled new professional and personal responsibilities. The authors identify impactful and helpful recommendations to improve staff morale including advocating for work flexibility and fair pay, meaningfully incorporating staff voices in decision-making processes, and investing in staff professional development and career advancement opportunities. Several years after the start of COVID-19-related shutdowns, the takeaways from the authors' research are arguably more imperative for library institutions to consider and to apply as more emphasis is being placed on workplace burnout, worker mental health, and organizational empathy. It highlights inequities within library organizational cultures and contributes to amplifying the voices of library staff who are underrepresented in this area of research.

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