# Chapter 5
# Academic Librarianship and Burnout

## ABSTRACT

*Given the emotionally laden work done by academic librarians, and given what the book has established so far on emotional labor and its contribution to emotional exhaustion, which in turn contributes to burnout, it should come as no surprise that academic librarians seem quite prone to burnout. This chapter explores the phenomenon of burnout among academic librarians, looking at the issue from three perspectives: a public services perspective; a technical services perspective; and a managerial/administrative perspective. It draws comparisons between front-of-house (FOH) and back-of-house (BOH) employees in the hospitality industry and the work of librarianship, given its customer service orientation. It draws on the professional literature for causes of burnout in librarianship. This chapter highlights the strong emphasis that has been placed on burnout research in bibliographic instruction librarians while criticizing the lack of research on technical services positions and managers/administrators, underlining the need for more research regarding public services positions that aren't tied to instruction, technical services positions, and managerial/administrative positions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Given the impact that emotions, emotional labor, and emotional exhaustion can have on academic librarians, it should therefore come as no surprise that we would devote a chapter to the phenomenon of burnout in academic librarianship. We regard burnout as the penultimate problem associated with

the emotional dimensions of librarianship, and understanding how it affects academic librarians specifically can help the profession better understand its vulnerabilities as well as develop strategies and solutions for combating, preventing, or at least mitigating the impact of emotional labor and exhaustion before they can develop into burnout.

There is a public perception that librarianship in general is not a stressful profession especially compared to medical/healthcare professions and other public services professions like the hospitality industry (Togia, 2005), but in a surprising study conducted in Britain that examined stress in different occupations including firefighters, librarians, police officers, teachers, and train operators, it was revealed that librarians perceived their jobs as quite stressful (Casey, 2012; Christian, 2015). The researcher posited that "librarians might experience less-on-the-job stress," as one might expect in comparison to firefighters and police officers; however, the study revealed that librarians "ranked 'highest in the level of perceived stress overall'" (Christian, 2015, p. 2). Based on this finding the study concluded that librarians "are highly susceptible to workplace burnout" (Christian, 2015, p. 2).

Obviously, though, "academic librarianship" is a broad term that encompasses a variety of types of librarianship which vary in the kind of "people work" they do in the course of a normal day. A reference librarian or circulation librarian can be regarded as a frontline employee – the equivalent of the "front-of-house" (FOH) employees in restaurants and other hospitality organizations – who have the most contact with patrons/customers and therefore seem to do a lot of people work as part of their jobs. However, there are other forms of librarianship which might be regarded as behind-the-scenes – or the equivalent of the "back-of-house" (BOH) employees – who may have less direct contact with the public but are no less susceptible to burnout, though it may be the result of different factors (Bunge, 1987; Mastel & Innes, 2013).

In terms of librarianship-based research on *stress*, one of the earliest library publications on the topic is the 1982 article "Librarian Burn-out" in *Library Journal* by Rudolph Bold. This article will be explored in more detail shortly, but it is worth mentioning at this point because it refers to a 1980 American Library Association (ALA) conference seminar entitled "Sex and Psychos in the Stacks" which "considered the mayhem and even murder perpetrated against librarians nationwide and how to deal with it" (Bold, 1982, p. 2048). It seems that even before the literature began to regard the topics of stress and burnout in earnest, the profession itself was already

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