

“Patron Satisfaction” and “Cordiality”: Examining Emotional Labor and Harassment at the Reference Desk

INFO 601-02 — Assignment 4: Thought Paper

Laura Indick

Introduction

When I read the Reference and User Services Administration's guidelines for reference interactions, I was surprised by how they seemed to prioritize making patrons feel at home, rather than conveying information. Examining the history of librarianship, I came to see how such gendered expectations are an effect of the "feminization" of the profession at the end of the 19th century. Looking for a model of reference that challenged these centuries-old gender norms, I discovered a feminist theory of reference that aims to forge a deeply-felt connection between patron and librarian. However, a close look at the theory of "emotional labor" reveals the perils of such manipulation of workers' feelings. Even more alarming, one reference librarian's story of sexual harassment demonstrates how the RUSA guidelines can create an environment ripe for inappropriate patron behavior. Ultimately, I suggest that seeking substantial relationships with mentors and peers could provide librarians with the collaboration, coalition, and support they need as they encounter the best and worst of reference interactions.

Reading RUSA guidelines for gendered expectations

The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), publishes guidelines "for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." Given the ALA's standing as the oldest and largest library association in the world (ALA, About ALA, n.d.), these guidelines hold a prominent place in setting field-wide standards. With the stated goal of achieving "a higher level of satisfaction among users," the guidelines suggest that the librarian "be approachable" and "make the patron feel comfortable" (The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), 2013, Lines 1.0-2.0). She should focus on "making initial eye contact, employing open body language, or using a

friendly greeting” (RUSA, 2013, 1.2.2) and “communicat[ing] in a receptive, cordial, and supportive manner” (RUSA, 2013, 3.1.1).

Upon first reading, I was struck by how gendered and antiquated these guidelines seem. With the inclusion of terms like “cordial” and the focus on a “supportive manner,” they seem like something from an etiquette guide or a women’s magazine. I am not alone in drawing this comparison: Shawnta Smith-Cruz argues that the guidelines “mirror the attributes of finishing school” (Smith-Cruz, 2011, p. 249), and Emmelhainz et al. note that they “evoke our culture’s existing behavioral guidelines for dating [or] for pleasing a husband” (Emmelhainz et al., 2017, p. 40). I even looked at *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* from 1860 as a representative comparison. The stated goal of the etiquette manual is “to make others pleased with us” (Hartley, 1860/2011, p. 3), which mirrors the focus on patron “satisfaction,” and the ideal woman is described as someone who “will always endeavor to set every one around them at ease” (Hartley, 1860/2011, p. 4), just as the reference librarian will “make the patron feel comfortable.” So, why is it that guidelines from a professional organization sound so much like a 19th century etiquette manual?

“Women’s work”: the history of a profession

To answer that question, we must look at the history of women in librarianship. The stereotype of the librarian as “a kindly maiden lady” did not always exist; prior to the 1870s, librarians were seen as “grim, grouchy, eccentric, and *male*” (Newmyer, 1976, p. 44, emphasis original). At the end of the 19th century, however, women began to flock to the profession, and by 1910, 78.5% of library workers in the U.S. were female (Newmyer, 1976). Women were welcomed into the “new and fast-growing field” because of the need for “low-paid but educated recruits” (Garrison, 1972, p. 2). Male library administrators were open about their financial

motives, saying that hiring women would help “lessen the excessive cost of library administration.” (Perkins, 1876, as cited in Garrison, 1972, p. 133).

Many people leaned on prevailing Victorian notions of femininity to make this flood of female workers seem more palatable. Librarianship was described as “an easy transition for women from the domestic realm,” and it was said that female workers would create “the atmosphere of a middle-class home” in the library (Gaines, 2014, p. 89). Such thinking was not just put forth by men: “women themselves were invested in upholding an ideal of Victorian genteel virtue as a way of rationalizing their entry into the previously male-only domain.” (Keer & Carlos, 2014, p. 75). Such language was so widespread that it became cemented in professional policies and literature. For example, personality tests such as the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) Femininity Scale were given to people applying to library schools and jobs in the 1960s and ‘70s, with more “feminine” answers being rated more positively (Keer & Carlos, p. 75). The RUSA guidelines’ emphasis on making the patron feel at home is the embodiment of this longstanding discursive tradition.

Looking at feminist alternatives

Noting how 19th-century expectations of “women’s work” had affected professional guidelines, I turned to explicitly feminist conceptions of reference librarianship to find a more empowering model. I found one in Veronica Arellano-Douglas’s 2018 essay, “From Interpersonal to Intersubjective: Relational theory and mutuality in reference.” The essay is a direct reaction to gendered expectations in the field: she criticizes the idea that a “feminized labor force” should “put students at ease by being unobtrusive but friendly, smiling and making eye contact” and “erasing all of the work that goes into this service provider façade.” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 227). As an alternative, she proposes that the model of intersubjective

mutuality, or “growth through empathy exchange” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 232) “can be used to foster an empathetic, feminist, and egalitarian practice of reference work” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 224). This model draws on the notion of an “ethics of care,” which focuses on the “relatedness of persons” (Held, 2006, p. 14) and feminist pedagogical theory, which encourages teachers to honor the voices and experiences of their students while sharing their own authentic emotions (Accardi, 2013, p. 44).

Arellano-Douglas uses an example from her own reference work to demonstrate the potential of intersubjective mutuality, recalling an appointment with a student, Letty, who showed up “visibly exhausted and agitated.” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 236). She was able to reassure Letty by sharing her own experiences, which helped create “a learning environment in which [Letty’s] feelings and decisions were valued,” and facilitated “an honest exchange of knowledge and sentiment” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 237). In this example, and throughout the essay, Arellano-Douglas sets up a dichotomy between a false, “performed” display on one hand, and an “authentic” emotion and self on the other. She notes, “in forcing ourselves to smile, look friendly, and perform concern we distance ourselves from our authentic sense of self” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 239). In contrast, the empathy expressed in her model “is not *performative*”; instead, “it is an expression of genuine interest and concern” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 232, emphasis original) and “the librarian is under no pressure to perform” but rather “can be her authentic self” (Arellano-Douglas, 2018, p. 235). While on the surface this makes sense, I wondered if, if a surface-level expression of emotion is draining, the effort to produce *genuine* emotion, especially over a long period of time, wouldn’t be *more* exhausting. Also, if emotion is used for the purposes of a job, can it truly be said to come from an “authentic” sense of self?

Emotional labor and the danger of “deep acting”

Arellano-Douglas mentions the notion that “forcing [oneself] to smile, look friendly, and perform concern” distances someone from their “authentic self” as a matter of course, without feeling the need to explain further, which demonstrates how widely accepted the idea of “emotional labor” has become. But, as this theory has become so ubiquitous, crucial aspects of it have gotten lost.

The term “emotional labor” was coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*. In it, she explains that emotional labor “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). She focuses on the case of flight attendants, but posits that “we are all partly flight attendants,” estimating that half of women workers have jobs that call for emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983, p. 11). Hochschild does not suggest that people excise emotional labor entirely from their lives —there is emotion work even in positive personal relationships. The difference is that “between people of equal status in a stable relationship,” there is an equitable emotional exchange: we may sometimes “return a worked-up cheerfulness, a pretended interest” but, over time, “the debtor makes up the debt” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 84). However, in the workplace, “it is often part of an individual’s job to accept uneven [emotional] exchanges” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 85). As Hochschild explains, “the airline passenger may choose not to smile, but the flight attendant is obliged not only to smile but to try to work up some warmth behind it.” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 19)

It is important to note the role that authenticity and sincerity play here: it is not just the performed emotion but also the obligation to make that emotion feel *genuine* (“to try to work up some warmth”) that makes the emotional exchange an inherently unequal one. In fact, Hochschild cites the PSA jingle “our smiles are not just painted on” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 4) and

passenger questionnaires that grade flight attendants on whether they were “genuinely concerned” and “seemed sincere” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 117) to demonstrate that companies make money off of (at least the appearance of) workers’ authenticity. In order to fulfill these demands, people become adept at “deep acting,” in which they control their thoughts to create a “genuine” emotional response — for example, thinking of a passenger “as if” they are a friend to elicit a more sympathetic response (Hochschild, 1983, p. 110).

Although Arellano-Douglas seems to believe that authenticity will protect librarians from the toll taken by performative emotion, Hochschild would doubtless argue the opposite. She notes that estrangement from one’s feelings, or “emotional deadness,” is much more common in the flight attendant, “who must try to be genuinely friendly to a line of strangers” than other workers “who can feel free to hate” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 187-189). In other words, it is precisely the fact that they “must try to be genuinely friendly” that causes estrangement. She further warns against the worker who “identifies too wholeheartedly with the job,” saying she “is likely to offer warm, personal service,” but “is more likely to suffer stress and be susceptible to burnout” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 186-7).

The most common effect of such high emotional demands, Hochschild found, was the decreased ability to “listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 21). While she details the emotionally devastating effects this had on workers’ private lives, it can also be dangerous on the job, as workers may be slower to recognize and react to unsafe situations.

When feminized expectations become dangerous: harassment at the reference desk

My first concern with both the RUSA guidelines and the model of intersubjective mutuality was the emotional labor involved, but my secondary concern goes beyond the potential

emotional toll. I wonder what happens when a patron breaks the social contract and acts in a way that is actually injurious to the librarian. Shawnta Smith-Cruz answers this question in essay about her recurring sexual harassment by a patron (Smith-Cruz, 2011). She explains that she came to realize that the RUSA guidelines' calls for a patron to maintain "eye contact, smile, stand up, move closer, probe for conversation, then encourage the patron to return" can create "a breeding ground for sexual harassment" (Smith-Cruz, 2011, p. 248). In addition, the danger of these gendered expectations is heightened for marginalized women: as a black lesbian, Smith-Cruz explains, her body is viewed as inherently sexualized, resulting in more harassment than that which might be experienced by a straight middle-aged white librarian (Smith-Cruz, 2011).

Smith-Cruz's essay especially struck me because it echoed a series of similar encounters I had while working as a volunteer at the Brooklyn Public Library. I too came to realize that my unflaggingly "cordial" tone had the effect of softening my "no" and giving the patron the sense that he should try again. Therefore, while I am hesitant to focus too much on the librarian's behavior as creating a "breeding ground for sexual harassment," because that could place the blame on the female victim merely for being polite, I see the danger of teaching young female reference librarians that patron "satisfaction" and "comfort" come first. But beyond changing the wording of the guidelines, is there a way to make the reference desk a safer place, emotionally and physically, for the (female) librarian?

Solidarity and mentorship as a potential solution

In Hochschild's study of flight attendants, she noted they could invoke their "semiprivate "we-girls" right to anger and frustration" with their supervisors, but "with the understanding that the official axe would fall on anyone who expressed her anger in a more consequential way" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 114). I wonder, however, if it would be possible to strengthen such a

support network so that someone *could* express anger “in a more consequential way.” In Smith-Cruz’s essay, she recalls attending a workshop, which was “transformed” “into a nurturing support group” when other participants encouraged her to “exercise two very vital actions: clarity and consistency.” Additionally, her mentor’s recommendation that she keep a written log of her experience served as “evidence” and allowed her to “own these words” (Smith-Cruz, 2011, p. 244-245). Together, this “nurturing support” and “helpful recommendation” (Smith-Cruz, 2011, p. 245) emboldened her to respond to the patron:

“No. I do not. You make me uncomfortable. You make me feel as if I cannot come to work [...] If I have to say it again, I will call security, and have you expelled from this library.” (Smith-Cruz, 2011, p. 245)

Similarly, in my own experience, it was the advice of an experienced librarian friend that made me feel capable of more firmly rebuffing the patron. My friend reassured me that supervisors and security staff tend to be supportive of female librarians’ boundaries and willing to expel “problem patrons” and ban “repeat offenders.” These positive examples of support from peers and mentors is a far cry from Hochschild’s experience with Delta supervisors telling flight attendants that sexual harassment was “too bad” but “all in the line of public-contact work” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 29). It even marks a departure from the RUSA guidelines, which imply that patron satisfaction is paramount, regardless of what the patron might do or say. Although there are still strong parallels when it comes to emotional labor, it gives me hope to realize that there are substantial differences between the experience of flight attendants in the 1970s and that of reference librarians today.

This notion of solidarity draws directly from feminist pedagogy: in *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks speaks to how “crucial” it is to “shar[e] ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern” (hooks, 1994, p. 129-30). She uses

the example of her relationship with another teacher with whom she has built “a space of emotional trust where intimacy and regard for one another can be nourished” (hooks, 1994, p. 132). This idea is also grounded in empirical data: studies have shown that peer and mentor relationships can be essential in dealing with the effects of emotional labor, as detailed in Peng (2015). Even implementing discreet, practical fixes in the library setting can help foster support: Matteson & Miller (2014) use the example of a red folder kept behind a reference desk that a library staff member can pick up to signal that they need assistance in dealing with a difficult patron. In order to make sure that supervisors know what to do in these situations, Matteson & Miller (2014) suggest that “two-pronged” training would be critical, with training for all employees and additional training specifically for managers. Although attempts at creating mentor-mentee relationships from the top down will not always work perfectly, if libraries can create the foundations of support networks, it is likely that librarians will continue to strengthen them with their own personal and professional relationships with colleagues and peers.

Conclusions

The theory of emotional labor, as well as tactics of coalition-building and solidarity, are essential lessons from the iconic feminist writers of the 1970s-90s, and it would certainly behoove all of us to understand them more deeply. But it is especially essential for those of us working in a “feminine” profession that still bears the marks of its history so clearly that professional guidelines focus on creating a comfortable environment for the patron, at the expense of the librarian. It is wonderful to read of moments of true emotional connection with patrons, but, given the existing gendered working environment, it is essential that we are wary of any suggestion that the librarian must offer even more of her authentic emotional self to the workplace. Perhaps one day the societal environment will have changed so drastically that

“inappropriate” patron behavior is a thing of the past, but in the meantime, in order to guard both her emotional self and physical body from the difficult aspects of reference, it seems that today’s reference librarian must intentionally create a network of colleagues and mentors to offer emotional support and suggestions for dealing with worst-case scenarios. Hopefully this will one day be more codified, but it also possible for individual librarians to create small links in these networks themselves, and in fact they are already doing so. By merely being more aware of the stakes, and more consciously reaching out to those above and below us, I believe that we, at all levels of the profession, can help make the reference desk a better place to be.

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