

## The Causes and Consequences of Low Morale Amongst Public Librarians

Kendrick, K. D. (2020). The public librarian low-morale experience: A qualitative study. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(2), 1-32. <http://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i2.5932>

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## Evidence Summary

### The Causes and Consequences of Low Morale Amongst Public Librarians

#### A Review of:

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#### Abstract

**Objective** – To understand if, how, and within what parameters, librarians working in public libraries experience low morale.

**Design** – Semi-structured interview, phenomenology

**Setting** – Public libraries in Canada and the United States

**Subjects** – Participants (N = 20) were credentialed librarians who worked or had worked in a public library, and who experienced low morale due to their work.

**Methods** – Invitations were distributed to 10 electronic mailing lists. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants -- they represented librarians with a range of experience, working within a variety of specialties. The researcher received informed consent and the participants completed a short survey in order to collect demographic data before taking part in semi-structured interviews. The

interviews were transcribed and coded, after which data were analyzed and thematic clusters identified.

**Main results** – Various types of abuse, either performed by library users (ex. physical and verbal abuse), or by colleagues/managers/administrators (ex. emotional abuse, system abuse, and negligence) were revealed to cause low morale in public librarians. Data show that the participants' responses to the abuse influenced their affective, cognitive, and physiological well-being, as well as professional expectations and trajectories. This study identified three low morale impact factors and seven enabling systems that were unique to public librarians when compared to academic librarians. The unique impact factors are: personal safety, resilience narratives, and social contexts. The enabling systems are: organizational structure, library workplace culture, on-demand relocation, policies, training, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), and politics.

**Conclusion** – This study builds on the literature and provides additional evidence on the prevalence of low morale in LIS workplaces. The data show that there are similarities in the causes and consequences of low morale in the workplace amongst public librarians and their academic counterparts. Understaffing, mission creep, and working with underserved and marginalized communities all play a part in the morale of public librarians. Low morale negatively affects public librarians' mental and physical health, as well as their professional outlook and trajectory. The author makes a case for comprehensive leadership training for public library management, as well as the presence of people with different expertise (such as social workers and first responders) in public libraries. Additionally, the author suggests the need for further research on topics that came up in this study.

### Commentary

There are a handful of articles published on workplace morale in libraries dating back decades (e.g. Wilkins Jordan, 2014), but the real proliferation of research on the topic began after the publication of the author's seminal paper in 2017 (Kendrick). Recent articles use a variety of methods (e.g. Kennedy & Garewal, 2020), and cover a variety of settings and types of employment – public and academic librarians, as well as library staff (e.g. Glusker et al., 2022).

The study was appraised using the *Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies* created by Letts et al. (2007). The purpose of the research was clearly stated, and the context and definitions of the concepts under investigation are outlined in the literature review. The methodology chosen was appropriate given the objectives of the study. The demographics of the participants are described, and although attempts were made to ensure participants were representative, it is unclear how many are from Canada. The author does not state whether the interview questions were validated, or whether the sampling was done until redundancy was reached. Data coding and analysis is rigorous and well described.

The results section is well structured and very detailed. This research builds on the author's previous work. As such, there are several references to themes elucidated in those earlier studies. For example, the unique impact factors and enabling systems identified in this study affect public librarians *in addition to* those identified as affecting academic librarians as previously described (Kendrick, 2017; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019). Excerpts from the interviews help the reader better understand the experiences of the public librarians from their own perspective. In addition to outlining the causes and consequences of low morale in the participant group, the author includes descriptions of coping strategies, attempts at mitigating the experience, and the recovery process for participants who moved to new positions.

The results of this study verify the experiences of public librarians' low morale in the workplace. The author offers several recommendations on topics for further research. These include how leaders

(within both the library and the political sphere) and communities' value people working in public libraries, and the implementation and impact of security measures in public libraries. The research results confirm that mission creep, compassion fatigue, funding cuts, and workplace incivility are harming LIS practitioners both personally and professionally. The author suggests countermeasures to decrease workplace abuse, neglect, and dysfunction. These measures include empathetic, authentic management and leadership training, having social workers and first responders working collaboratively with public librarians, and the need for strong library employee advocacy.

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