Please Scream Inside Your Heart: How a Global Pandemic Affected Burnout Experiences in an Academic Library

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the authors' experiences of the academic library workplace. Despite additional challenges introduced by working primarily remotely, the authors also witnessed their organization take steps toward making academic library workplaces more compassionate. Using narrative inquiry, the authors interrogate their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and elements of workplace organization and treatment of library workers that offered brief glimpses of a workplace that is kinder and more concerned with employee well-being. However, over time, a renewed emphasis on pre-pandemic organization workplace values has been witnessed by the authors. The authors discuss what pre-COVID workplace practices are harmful and oppressive elements of white supremacy culture and capitalistic culture and should be abandoned, and what a compassionate workplace culture (Ramachandran et al., 2023) post-COVID might look like.

Keywords: burnout, COVID-19, overwork, capitalism, white supremacy culture, vocational awe, role overload

Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of our physical library building, requiring all library services to move online and all library workers to work remotely. This resulted in a major expansion of workload for faculty and staff as we transitioned our services, systems, and workflows to remote work and exacerbated many pre-existing organizational issues. In particular, COVID-19 exposed weaknesses in our organization which are not unique to our workplace, but rather are often deeply embedded in the organizational culture of academic libraries in the United States.

Prior to the pandemic, we were researching burnout in academic libraries. As COVID-19 rolled across the globe, our research efforts stagnated and stalled. We kept in contact with each other but were overwhelmed by our own experiences of burnout as we adjusted to this new reality of lockdown and overwork. As we checked in with each other, we decided that it would be most beneficial for us to refocus our work through the lens of autobiographical narrative inquiry. Here we discuss how pre-existing organizational stresses combined with the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic created conditions that can result in burnout for academic library workers (and resulted in experiences of burnout for the authors). This article is not meant to be an objective, generalizable, or scientific assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on academic library workers but is intended to document and share the lived experiences of the authors. We share these experiences to expose organizational issues that we identified working in an academic library before, during, and after COVID-19, and we suspect these experiences are not unique among academic library workers.

In this article, we examine the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic did not, by itself, cause experiences of employee burnout, but instead that structural and cultural factors deeply embedded into our workplace created conditions for burnout that were only exacerbated by the stresses that occurred as a result of the pandemic. We explore how capitalism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy culture contribute to burnout. Making the connections between these structural problems will hopefully help us (and others) identify problematic situations and promote a shift towards more humanistic management, appropriate staffing, and manageable workloads. While there appears to be a growing interest in worker burnout and resisting white supremacist culture in library science literature, we hope that sharing our experiences will build on this interest and show that support for workers is necessary to reduce the conditions that ultimately contribute to worker burnout.

Methodology

This article utilizes autobiographical narrative inquiry to examine experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing more personal connection to the concepts discussed than solely theoretical argument. Narrative inquiry "rests on the epistemological assumption that we human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures" (Bell, 2002, p. 207). We are real people with real experiences. Our aim is that our stories clarify the urgency and appeals to pathos

in a way that other forms of the scholarly record may not. This article will feature narrative inquiry pieces written by the authors reflecting on their experiences during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (roughly March 2020-mid 2021). We did not use a prompt to generate our narratives. Rather, we took a closer examination of the experiences we were sharing with each other in our meetings and discussions.

We began collaboration on this article due to the shared realization that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we not only learned and developed new ways of accomplishing tasks and getting work done, but we learned about ourselves through our relationships with each other and both our shared and divergent experiences. We therefore chose the method of narrative inquiry to document our experiences individually and critically examine those experiences relationally through shared analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Through retelling these experiences, we critically examine our stories in order to "offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions, and new ways of doing things" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p.188). While we do not claim to speak for all library workers, we hope that our stories will resonate with others in the profession.

Literature Review

Burnout

Burnout is a psychological syndrome that can occur due to chronic interpersonal workplace stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Workers experiencing burnout tend to become exhausted, cynical, and detached from their work (also described as depersonalization or estrangement) and feel diminished personal accomplishment (Wright & Bonnet, 1997). Maslach and Leiter emphasize that these experiences of stress occur within a social context at work, and the individual's conception of both self and others are involved in the development of burnout. Burnout has been found to be prevalent among workers in human services professions such as health care and education and has been found to be common among academic library workers (Geary & Hickey, 2019; Sheesley, 2001; Wood et al., 2020). Research into organizational and interpersonal causes of burnout have identified role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity as workplace factors that lead to burnout (Kilroy et al., 2016). Burnout as a topic in academic library literature is robust, as exemplified by Edward Corrado's publications on the topic spanning from 1974 to the present. Burnout is harmful for worker well-being and certain dimensions of burnout - particularly emotional exhaustion - can also harm productivity and organizational effectiveness (Amer et al., 2022).

Role conflict occurs when the attitudes of colleagues, supervisors, or other people or groups are not in sync with the behavior and/or values of the worker (Papastylianou & Polychronopoulos, 2009). Workers experiencing role conflict may have simultaneously competing pressures that directly prevent the worker from successfully completing their work, leading to stress on the worker (Jawahar et al., 2007). Yousefi (2017) describes a manifestation of role conflict that is often experienced by workers in academic libraries when stated organizational values directly conflict with what is *actually* done in the workplace. For example, stated organizational values may emphasize the importance of diversity, equity, and

inclusion (DEI), and even assign responsibility to workers to advance DEI goals, but in practice an organization may be apathetic or completely unwilling to make meaningful changes to dismantle racism, white supremacy, and other exclusionary practices that are deeply embedded in the daily work and infrastructure of the organization (Yousefi, 2017). Role overload is a form of role conflict that is experienced when the demands and responsibilities of one's work are beyond the resources of the worker - in other words, there is too much to do and not enough time, support, and/or funding with which to do it all (Kilroy et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2005). In libraries and other public service organizations, role overload and employee exhaustion are an outcome of organizational pressure placed on individuals to "do more with less" (Esteve, 2017) and a perpetual culture of austerity (Almeida, 2020). Role ambiguity occurs when the boundaries of one's job expectations are not clear and/or it is unclear how performance is measured (Kahn et al., 1981; Kilroy et al., 2016).

Prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions among the library faculty about issues related to burnout and how to address/prevent it were already taking place, along with discussions often centering on the depth and breadth of workload assignments, the high number of highly complex simultaneous projects constantly underway in the library, a general sense that the library did not have enough people to get the work done that needed to get done, and the disproportionate impact of these workload issues for BIPOC librarians. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic increased workloads even further, the present authors each reported feeling as though they had to work far beyond 40 hours per week to meet deadlines and complete work, often sacrificing sleep and personal well-being to do so. Some of our colleagues generally reported feeling unable to stop thinking about work or to enjoy life outside of work due to these workload pressures.

New projects, new initiatives, and new services are often proposed or started without any additional funding, additional staffing, or any discussion of what tasks will be taken away. In her groundbreaking 2018 article, Fobazi Ettarh's concept of vocational awe in librarianship connects directly to experiences of resource scarcity, perpetual austerity, and pressure to "do more with less." Many entering the profession are expected to treat the job as a "calling," much like a religious vocation. This positioning aligns libraries with sacred spaces and the library workers with saviors and works in tandem with white supremacy culture to reinforce capitalistic structures, institutional oppression, and racism (Okun, 2020). The sudden increase in requests coming to the library, combined with a deeply ingrained academic library culture of vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018), as well as long-standing (but often unspoken) fear often held by library workers that libraries could be perceived as irrelevant, resulted in workers feeling pressure to "show" to all university stakeholders that the library was essential to the functioning of the university during the COVID-19 crisis. Library workers strove to respond to this pressure at the expense of sleep, mental health, and personal well-being.

Working through a pandemic is difficult, and especially so in a pandemic with a highly contagious infectious disease like COVID-19. Navigating the safety parameters that needed to be in place to keep staff and patrons safe was challenging. Staying on top of the ever-evolving best practices for material handling took time, effort, and

dealing with shifting metrics. In addition, not having the usual supports in place and coping mechanisms meant that library workers felt enormous pressure. It is important to document these experiences so that we may identify and understand the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Restubog et al. (2020) argue:

> […] we believe it would be valuable for future research to examine how this pandemic may differentially impact the career and vocational behavior of individuals in various career stages. Given previous research showing that minority or disadvantaged workers often bore the brunt of stressful work events (Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015), it is especially important to examine the impact of this pandemic on economically and socially vulnerable groups (e.g., single parents, immigrants, refugees). (p.4)

Capitalism, Neoliberalism, and Scarcity

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) have framed the concept of "academic capitalism" as centering on the necessity of faculty and staff in academic institutions to participate in market behaviors in competition for scarce third-party resources (such as state funding, grant awards and money from donors). While these funding pressures are absolutely present in academic libraries, capitalist pressure and neoliberal concepts of efficiency and managerialism also manifest in how employees in higher education are expected to conceptualize their work, themselves, and organizational priorities. Library organizational priorities center the user experience and the necessity of metrics and analytics to demonstrate that users are using the library. Underlying the emphasis of analytics and the ability to communicate these metrics to stakeholders is an implication that these metrics must always be going up in order to prove the library's value. Neoliberal approaches to work deeply associate work with "the ideal of self-realization" (Elliott, 2018, p. 1286). In the neoliberal organization, there is constant pressure to demonstrate return on investment and increase productivity despite a reduction in resources, working toward "always greater numbers and less time" (Davies & Bansal, 2005, p. 51). The refrain of "do more with less" is a common one in academia (Kinman, 2014), combining the push for productivity and capitalism with the austerity of neoliberalism. Academic libraries exist within the higher education infrastructure and the stresses of academic capitalism manifest in academic libraries in specific ways, including overwork/role overload, dehumanization, and vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018). Responding to this environment of scarcity and lack of funding, Nicholson (2019) identifies temporal intensification, expanded roles and responsibilities, and increased workloads as pressures experienced by librarians in a neoliberal academy that explicitly values efficiency, productivity, and timeliness, often at the expense of employee wellbeing.

Parallels can be drawn between workplace stressors that have been identified to cause burnout and characteristics of white supremacy. White supremacy culture and capitalism dehumanize employees using direct and indirect structural and cultural organizational practices. Examples of dehumanizing practices and experiences in academic library culture are found in a growing body of literature documenting and resisting racism and white supremacy culture in academic libraries and librarianship (Cooke, 2019; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019; Ferretti, 2020). During the pandemic, library employees experienced higher workloads and increased work intensification

requiring the development of new skills to adapt to constant change (Corrado, 2022). Elements of white supremacy culture are harmful to all library workers but are especially harmful to BIPOC library workers who also experience additional stressors in the workplace of daily racist assaults and invalidations by coworkers, lack of recognition for ideas and achievements and/or white library workers taking credit for the ideas and achievements of BIPOC library workers (Brown & Leung, 2018; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019). The organizational structures and culture of academic libraries dehumanize employees and can result in burnout, and evidence documenting burnout among library workers was already established prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sheesley, 2011; Kane, 2018; Wood et. al., 2020).

Library and Information Science is a white- and female-dominated profession. Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) explains how white women have reinforced the "limits imposed by patriarchy" (p. 672) while also having the traits that are deeply rooted in whiteness as well as librarianship, noting "how the set of characteristics that comprised a select femininity reserved for white women (including the assumed ability to educate and work with children) was leveraged for their participation in racial projects" (p. 676). She proposes that to move forward in a more inclusive manner, we must have a more inclusive curricula for LIS education, we must push our scholarship, research, and instruction to be intersectional, to push beyond the monoculture of whiteness, and to call out and resist the assumptions that whiteness is the norm.

Those interested in entering the library profession face an unspoken requirement to understand academic bureaucracy in order to be successful. Nataraj et al. (2020) note that Eurocentric practices in academic libraries and reinforcing bureaucratic structures [like meetings] reinforces oppressive culture. "Structured group work disproportionately contributes to the paralysis, frustration, and oppression of BIPOC library workers." (p. 8) In this way, the library profession can be exclusionary and oppressive because of its reliance on practices that are undefined, incoherent and may not be familiar to BIPOC workers. BIPOC workers must then work harder to present themselves as professionals according to an aspirational standard of whiteness, which impacts how they and their work is perceived. Without what appears to be a natural and willingly embraced performance of Eurocentric demeanor and dress, a person's competence, qualifications, and reliability are at risk of being questioned (Nataraj et al., 2020).

Table 1 illustrates possible parallels between causes of burnout and elements of White Supremacy Culture, and examples of how these factors can manifest in academic library organizations. While many elements of White Supremacy Culture can align with multiple burnout factors (and vice versa), and this table therefore represents an oversimplification of these themes, visualizing these parallels serves as a way to understand how organizational structures and cultures can work together to create burnout conditions.

Table 1
Parallels Between burnout causes and white supremacy culture in the library workplace

Causes of burnout	Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (Okun, 2001)	Examples of manifestation in white supremacist/capitalist academic library culture from the authors' experiences.
Role conflict	• Defensiveness • Worship of the written word • Only one right way • Paternalism • Either/or thinking • Individualism • Objectivity	• Professional practice as personal identity • "Leave it at the door" and expectations that emotions, grief, and feelings of trauma are not allowable in the workplace • Assimilation; rigid standards of professionalism • Racist assaults ("microaggressions")
Role overload	• Sense of urgency • Quantity over quality • Progress is bigger/more	• Proving oneself (stereotype threat and overwork) • "Bottomless" workloads and job descriptions • Performative overwork and work intensification • "Do more with less" and perpetual austerity
Role ambiguity	• Perfectionism • Fear of Open Conflict • Power hoarding	• Tenure process and precarity of employment • Pressure to innovate; focus on entrepreneurship • Uncivil / racist behavior allowed to continue unchallenged

Narratives

This section features personal narratives of how the pandemic disrupted work, how the switch to remote and/or hybrid work affected their personal and professional lives, and lessons learned for a future where hybrid work and flexibility are (hopefully) becoming norms in academic library work. One narrative is written by a BIPOC librarian and two are written by White librarians.

Shutdown: Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!

The chaos of the shutdown is reflected in the emails from that time. Prior to March 10, 2020, COVID-19 was something that was happening in the news, and elsewhere. This quickly changed as within 7 days, we went from providing full, in-person services to moving our entire operations online. Messages from campus administration and library leadership expressed care for employees: rapidly scrambling to make sure everyone had the equipment they needed, creating flexible schedules, increased communication about library status, and emails calling for self-care, patience, and understanding.

Working from remote locations: at home, in bedrooms and dining rooms, garages and backyards, brought us together in a new virtual space and away from the library building. Elements of our personal lives and our (outside of work) humanity were more visible in the virtual working space. The flexibility of remote work introduced some positive elements: staying safe from a dangerous virus, allowing for more balance between work and home. But it also introduced some less desirable, and sometimes unexpected, elements. Some workers had a hard time focusing with family, pets, and kids around, so they shifted to working "off hours" or even working all night while distractions are minimal. This was sometimes rewarded or praised, with colleagues expressing admiration for late-night emails and evidence of working "around the clock". People are 'impressed' you sent an email at 2AM, not horrified. Working continuously serves to show that you are dedicated to your work rather than that you may be missing out on critical self-care needs. No one is really checking our hours or productivity levels when we are in the office, and yet work is still getting done.

There was a tacit understanding that there might be interruptions to virtual meetings: children and pets made cameo appearances, and tech disruptions when power would go out or someone's home network would go down. In one terrible instance, a colleague had a critical medical emergency during a Zoom meeting. While it is true that an emergency could have happened in-person and on campus, not being able to physically help our colleague or even know clearly how to direct the first responders to them deepened the trauma of an already devastating experience.

Efforts were also made to provide support and camaraderie with virtual social events like lunch hour meetups and a "dance break" during an all-library meeting. These efforts humanized colleagues. The message from campus was "we're all going through this together." Interpersonal interactions during this time were generally supportive and included more social get-togethers (like check-ins, hangouts with Airbnb experiences, virtual "potlucks," game time, and crafting events.) There was a concerted effort to embrace the "deep awkwardness" that is part of the virtual experience.

During lockdown, our library tried to implement as standard 50-minute meeting times for our virtual meetings. This would give people a ten-minute break between meetings instead of defaulting to an hour. This worked for a short time, but the larger organizational culture made it difficult to sustain over time. Meetings gradually drifted back to the one-hour format. As the pandemic has waned on, old ways crept back to being the norm. The campus communications have transitioned away from messages of support about staying safe to those of campus repopulation and eliminating the mask mandate. There is pressure to "return to normal" pre-pandemic times. Workers that

have been working from home successfully for over two years are now being told that they must return to campus. While telecommuting is now an ongoing option for some workers, they must petition their supervisor and the campus for approval. As the policy states, the CSU system "supports telecommuting when the campus determines that telecommuting is operationally feasible and is in its best interest." (CSUSM, n.d., p.1) Workers are required to make arrangements for childcare or ill family members during telecommuting shifts. These bureaucratic systems (Nataraj et al., 2020) and practices support restrictive structures of consolidated power and do little to support workers, further marginalizing vulnerable workers, those that might require medical accommodation, and those that have at-risk members of their family at home.

Narrative: Caregiving in Crisis

I started at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) in July 2019 - about a year before the pandemic forced us to close all physical aspects of our campus, including the library. During that time, I did my best to keep my work and my personal life separate. This was a difficult task for me as I had just moved across the country, had no friends or family nearby, and I am a single mother of a now 6-year-old. I struggled with coordinating childcare, dinner, and homework with attending conferences, leading a team of fourteen faculty and staff, participating in service opportunities, and keeping up with research and publishing. I did my best to keep from voicing my struggles because I knew that being a single mother made me a liability - at least in a world where capitalism is valued over having an actual life. I say this because in my experience, in academic spaces, it was expected that all employees leave our personal lives at the door. We were strictly meant to focus on work and not concern ourselves with our personal lives once we were on the clock. It was considered unprofessional and weak to have any semblance of a personal life as the culture of putting work first permeated academia. It was generally not often that children, pets, and other family members were seen - or even mentioned - in the work environment, unless a coworker felt comfortable enough to share such things with certain individuals. Of course, there were some academic library spaces that were more accepting of the humanity of their employees, but in most cases, library workers struggled to be seen as professional while having responsibilities outside of the workspace. For me, this meant picking my child up as late as was allowed so as to spend as much time physically in the workplace as possible, finding someone to watch my child for at least a full day so that I could attend conferences, working late at night after I put my child to sleep to show that I am just as valuable of an employee as those without caregiving responsibilities (and also to fill the privilege gap). Ultimately, I sacrificed the time and energy I needed for self-care to spend time with my child, so that I could be just as engaged with him as I was with my work.

When the pandemic forced us to close all physical aspects of the campus and work from home, it was as though in a shocking turn of events, it was discovered that employees were human beings with mental and emotional needs. Suddenly it was okay to talk about our personal lives and to put our wellbeing before our work. As we began to join meetings through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms, our colleagues saw us through the boxes on their screen as we kept our children busy, removed our cats from our keyboards, played fetch with our dogs, and asked our neighbors to stop mowing the lawn for just 30 more minutes, please! Through that box, we saw parts of each other's

lives that we may have never seen or known before that led to the humanizing of our colleagues and ourselves - something that was slightly present but ultimately not acknowledged to the extent in which it should have been pre-pandemic. Having to navigate these roles - often simultaneously - became a method of camaraderie as we were all going through this crisis together. For me, it was a relief to have people see and understand the struggles I faced as a single parent in a new state with a job that is meant for three people. It was a relief that having caregiving responsibilities while maintaining a sufficient output at work became viewed as a strength and not a liability. It was a relief to be offered support and understanding as I became a kindergarten teacher to my son; a pet parent to a formerly stray cat; a foster parent to dogs, puppies, cats, kittens, and a rabbit; and a resource for mental and emotional support for many of my colleagues.

Narrative: Example from a Worker with ADHD

A year prior to the pandemic, I was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Inattentive type). I had requested to be evaluated for ADHD primarily due to difficulties managing not just work challenges but also challenges as a working parent. Although I have had ADHD my entire life, since becoming a parent my coping skills and workarounds were no longer sufficient in order for me to focus and remember all of the things I needed to do in both my personal and professional life. I learned through the process of my diagnosis and treatment that I have difficulty with processing and remembering verbal information. I also struggle with important executive functions like working memory, which Cowan (2014) describes as "the retention of small amounts of information in a readily accessible form," (p. 197) *and managing transitions between tasks. Prior to the pandemic, my workload was already very high. I often worked long hours on evenings and weekends in order to keep up with all of the projects, emails, and tasks assigned to me, as well as fitting in research requirements for my tenure-track faculty position.*

Working from home during the pandemic with my family around me (while childcare centers and workplaces were closed) significantly exacerbated my ADHD symptoms. Transitioning constantly throughout the day from worker to parent and back again was emotionally and mentally exhausting for me. In order to find time to focus, I attempted to consolidate my work in the evenings after my family was asleep, scheduling work daily (including on weekends) from 9PM to 2AM, on weekdays trying to attend Zoom meetings as scheduled and answer emails between 9AM and 6PM, while intermittently engaging in childcare or domestic tasks as interruptions occurred. My child was only 4 years old at the start of the pandemic and had never seen me in "work mode," so it was difficult for her to understand why I couldn't talk to her while I was in meetings or trying to work during the day. While I was fortunate that my spouse was also home and provided childcare, my presence at home all day was so unusual and exciting for my daughter that trying to create a completely separate workspace was impossible for me. I made a sign for my bedroom/workspace door that said, "Can we talk to mom?" with an attached arrow set to either point to "Yes, come in!" or "No, I'm in a meeting" that ultimately did have some success. It was often forgotten if something particularly exciting happened that she wanted to share with me. At the same time, I felt guilty and sad for my daughter who, understandably, just wanted to spend time with me now that I was home more, but I had to tell her "Not now" more than a dozen times a day.

I know that many working parents experienced these challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, but for me my particular ADHD symptoms intensified these challenges. Every interruption took more time to transition from and refocus my attention. Dueling streams of verbal input (for example, my daughter asking me a question while at the same time a colleague was asking me a question in a Zoom meeting resulted in me being unable to process either input) as well as the lack of sleep exacerbating my already challenging ADHD symptoms ultimately made me realize I could not continue working from home. As soon as it became an option to work onsite in the library, I moved toward working in my campus office as much as possible. I now work entirely onsite and have realized that the remote environment simply doesn't work for me. I know that working from home can be hugely beneficial for others, including those with ADHD or other neurodivergence who find working from home much better than working in an often busy, loud, or distracting shared office, so I fully advocate for flexible working options, realizing that having the option to work remotely is not available to all of my colleagues, particularly those who work directly with users and keep our service points running. I also have the significant privilege of having an office with a door that I can close, which is something that not everyone in my department or organization can access.

Discussion: Making it Work through Role Overload

Table 2 identifies major themes that emerged in the autobiographical narratives above. One common thread that is found in all narratives is the pull toward overwork and experiences of role overload; while sensing pressure to overwork and go "above and beyond" was felt prior to the pandemic, each narrative describes how that pressure manifested more acutely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2 *Major themes in Stories*	
Story	Details
Shutdown: Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!	• Do More with Less: Adjusting to a new work environment while having to take on the work of moving everything to a virtual environment • Overwork: Being praised for showing dedication when working unconventional, long hours • Challenges changing work culture: Proves difficult to break the patterns and deep-rooted culture present in academic libraries.
Narrative: Caregiving in Crisis	• Capitalist culture: Facing the unspoken requirement to understand and become a part of capitalist academic culture. • Challenging work culture: Normalized expectations and culture were challenged by the move to a fully virtual environment. • Role overload/overwork: Working a job that is "meant for three people" • Personal Identity: Needing to be seen more as a person rather than as a contributor to a system
Narrative: Example from a Worker with ADHD	• Overwork: Facing high workloads even pre-pandemic • Working as a neurodiverse individual: Working with a system that does not typically/yet successfully acknowledge and accommodate neurodiverse individuals and their needs • Capitalist culture: Working within a culture that caters to a neurotypical individual without primary caregiver responsibilities

Despite the challenges of working through the COVID-19 pandemic, the narratives expose some positive developments of how our workplace adapted to these challenges. Both the *Shutdown* and the *Caregiving in Crisis* narratives illuminate a phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic that provided some relief during that stressful time: the experience of feeling permission to discuss difficulties with work/life balance with colleagues. The narrator of *Caregiving in Crisis* explains that prior to the pandemic it would be "unprofessional" and "weak" for colleagues to know about the existence of one's family or personal life, and that strict boundaries between one's personal and professional identities were required for success in an academic library workplace. Once it was impossible to 'hide' the existence of one's home responsibilities - by seeing children, family members, and pets on camera during zoom meetings - the narrator felt relief at being able to share their struggles openly with colleagues.

Another positive experience during the COVID-19 pandemic was how the library demonstrated remarkable innovation and resilience in finding solutions and workarounds as well as developing new workflows that persist years after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, our organization created workflows and implemented new technologies such as a contact-free locker checkout

system, a mail-to-home service for library materials (complete with pre-paid return shipping labels), and a community memory archive project. Prior to the pandemic, we would cancel any Inter-Library Loan (ILL) requests if we couldn't get the hardcopy of a book because we did not have the budget for unlimited ebooks. However, during lockdown our Collections, Delivery, and Access department created a digital-on-demand ebook purchasing workflow to fill requests for ILL materials that were not quickly or easily available in print. We transitioned all teaching, reference, outreach collaboration, and other student and faculty support and engagement to virtual venues. Others have written similar observations - one survey of library workers found a sense of positivity about the adaptability of libraries to the challenges of the pandemic (Salvesen & Berg, 2021). However, evidence is emerging that the stress of the pandemic has also taken a toll on the wellbeing of library workers (Corrado, 2022).

Although the narratives express appreciation for some changes to workplace practices during the height of the pandemic (such as the attempt to move toward 50-minute meetings, reduce time spent on Zoom, and share more relationally and personally with colleagues), the narratives also highlight the difficulty of maintaining those positive changes as the pandemic waned and the expectation to return to "normal" has emerged. While a few onsite projects and tasks naturally paused during the height of the pandemic, most day-to-day work expectations continued as before, with no real organization-wide effort to examine what we should *stop* doing in order to avoid overwork and role overload. A year into the pandemic, many workers experienced 'Zoom fatigue" from excessive online meetings (Bailenson, 2021). While additional resources were made available in the library in the form of funding to support purchasing equipment and electronic collections, no funding was available for additional staffing to support online training for library employees. The reality that many in our organization felt we were understaffed prior to the pandemic meant that overwork was all the more overwhelming once the COVID-19 pandemic required rapid changes and innovation. While there is ample evidence of organizational resilience in our narratives, there is also ample evidence of factors that heightened burnout experiences throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic - especially role overload and overwork.

Resilience narratives - and criticisms of them - are documented in academic library literature. Meredith Farkas noted in 2017 that "Our being able to do more with less felt like a badge of honor" (2017). She continues, "But that badge of honor also signals that you might keep getting less and doing more.... Resilience promotes the idea that library staffers can overcome anything and that those who cannot are at fault for their situation." Farkas combines the concepts of vocational awe and resilience narratives to explain that, while some librarians may see overwork as a "badge of honor," the effects of burnout are very real and the result of systemic issues beyond the control of individual workers. One of the ways vocational awe persists in the profession is the expectations that library workers serve endlessly without any acknowledgement that role overload exists, or that workloads may be unsustainable. As Ettarh (2018) writes, "Awe is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint." Or, as Kane (2018) expressed, "It feels like an insane risk to even admit feeling less than constantly

enthusiastic about every moment at work." Not only are library workers expected to do more with less, but they may be discouraged (through spoken or unspoken workplace norms) from expressing the reality that workload expectations may not be achievable. As the height of the COVID-19 pandemic drifts into the realm of memory more each day, pre-pandemic workplace norms regarding not openly revealing or sharing workload challenges (such as role overload) and pressure to compartmentalize one's work identity and personal identity are returning.

Role Overload

Intentionally resisting pressure to "do more with less" is key to preventing role overload that can lead to burnout. When asked to take on new projects, ask if there is fiscal or staffing support to help bring those new projects on long-term. In 2017, Merideth Farkas explains, "In the face of enthusiasm for a new service that could greatly benefit patrons, worrying about how it will be staffed long term can feel like negativity. But these conversations protect employees who may not even realize they're taking on too much."

In her keynote to the attendees of the 2022 [CALM (Conference on Academic Library Management) Conference,](#) Anne Helen Peterson gets to the heart of the conflict between austerity, resilience narratives, and burnout:

> This precarity and scarcity mindset fosters *horrible* work habits… That frantic need to feel and look productive, to work all the time, to allow work to swallow all parts of your life? It's a burnout trap. But it's also a means of trapping us within our organizations: we become so yoked to our work identities — in your case, as a librarian — and so deeply immersed in the work, that it becomes impossible to even conceive of doing anything other than what you're doing (para. 8).

Burnout is not the fault of workers. It is not a moral deficiency of the individual, but rather a rational and normal response to a capitalistic system that endlessly asks workers to give more.

Dehumanization

Organizations and individuals benefit (and resist the burnout-causing forces of dehumanization when workers feel safe to bring their authentic, multi-faceted identities to work (Ferdman & Roberts, 2013). Bringing your "whole self" to work should not merely be tolerated, but fully embraced and encouraged if we are to truly pursue the vision, mission, and values that many organizations - including the authors' own - espouse. It is impossible to ask workers to parse themselves into fragmented segments to fit into the workplace culture, and to hide their families, pets, stresses, cultural practices, dis/abilities, celebrations, and challenges. Bringing these personal experiences and identities into work and sharing them builds the inclusive environments libraries and academic institutions say they are striving for. As Ferdman & Roberts (2013) write, "knowing about and engaging with one's full self (and its various components) is vital both to tapping into all of one's potential as well as to maximizing one's contributions in diverse groups and organizations" (Ferdman & Roberts, 2013, p.96).

As described in the ADHD narrative, workers with disabilities may experience different or more intense challenges as a result of external events outside of their control. Procedures for workers to seek support or accommodations for disabilities and/or chronic health conditions should be explicitly discussed within organizations, and it should not be assumed that workers will know how to seek accommodations or support for disabilities. It is not enough to say an organization has a welcoming and/or inclusive work environment without explicitly naming workplace expectations, norms, and resources for those who may need accommodations. Employers that have appropriate knowledge and first-hand experience of a disability or disease, that support workplace accommodations, and offer flexibility in designing work schedules facilitate retained employment for workers with disabilities (Nevala et al., 2015). A study of academic library workers with disabilities authored by Oud (2019) found that workers would be more supported if disability were more openly discussed in workplaces. Self-advocacy is commonly assumed to be the only required mechanism for employees to receive accommodations, which in turn is assumed to "solve" the problem for the employee who experiences disability - but as Oud (2019) argues, this medical or individual view minimizes disability and centers the responsibility of making a more inclusive workplace on individuals who must self-advocate. Understanding that disability is experienced as a result of social and cultural structures - applying a social model of disability rather than a medical one - puts responsibility on organizations to remove barriers for inclusion (Kumbier & Starkey, 2016).

Supporting employees as whole people means creating explicit norms that encourage scheduling flexibility, normalizing the sharing of the fact that one may be a caregiver or have caregiving responsibilities, and creating psychological safety whereby employees can share the challenges they experience. The pre-pandemic workplace culture described in the caregiving narrative above - whereby the existence of children, pets, and family members was never discussed in the workplace - depersonalizes and dehumanizes workers. Normalizing disclosures regarding caregiving engenders empathy where colleagues can understand why meetings need to be rescheduled or deadlines need to be changed to be more realistic. Forcing people to compartmentalize their "personal" and "professional" lives reinforces systemic inequities. For example, a telecommuting policy implemented by the authors' campus in the second year of the pandemic that requires workers to have care for dependents or ill family members can be weaponized in a way that removes the ability to telecommute, for example, if young children are seen in the background of Zoom calls (even if the worker is not providing childcare and there is another person providing childcare in the home). There is an implication that employees may be "getting away with" something or taking advantage of the telecommuting policy if children are present in their home while they are also teleworking. To be precise, the policy specifies that there is to be no "dependent or medical care" happening while working from home. It does not make allowances for older or less dependent minors who do not necessarily need undivided and dedicated attention, nor does it make accommodations for the worker to check in briefly on an ill family member. The policy emphasizes that work can be the only consideration of a worker during work hours. This language in the policy disproportionately affects women who are often primary caregivers. In her 2019 post "LARPing [live action roleplaying] your job,"

Anne Helen Peterson explores how knowledge workers sometimes fall into the trap of trying to performatively show that they are *busybusybusy* and *workingworkingworking*. Peterson notes that "'knowledge work' rarely fits the standard, 40-hour-a-week capitalist paradigm" and that our coworkers are often too busy "LARPing" their own job to even notice what we are doing in ours. Knowledge workers then fall into the trap of working two jobs: "the job that produces the work, and a second, shadow job of *performing* our labor, of making the case for our own employment, for our entire vocation, over and over again" (Peterson, 2019). It is a burnout trap.

Vocational Awe

One of the effects of comparing library work to a passion or calling is that when workers express doubt about the achievability of workplace goals with limited resources, it is analogous to expressing doubt about the library as "savior" (Ettahr, 2018). Declining to take on more without additional resources or even saying no to additional tasks may go against deeply ingrained norms in the capitalist workplace. There is an implicit expectation that library workers will come from a place of "yes" and getting work done by any means necessary, even if it means sacrificing one's health and well-being. How do we respond to emergencies, incorporate "innovation", or start new services without additional fiscal support and staffing? Expectations for "normal" results were already burdensome. Throughout and beyond the pandemic, library workers have burned out because emergency expectations were not scaled back at all.

How do we engender a more flexible and adaptable organization without placing all of the load onto the workers? When employees 'fail' or productivity declines, a non-human centered workplace views such failure as the fault of the employee for not being enough (good enough, focused enough, productive enough, etc.). A more empathetic workplace won't happen without thoughtful work and careful planning. Kaetrina Davis Kendrick[1] has written extensively about low morale in librarianship and creating a more empathetic workplace. She also offers coaching services and consultations through her organization "Renewals"[2] for people and organizations that are looking to build empathetic leadership skills and improve workplace morale. Library workplaces should examine the organizational factors that are leading to an employee not feeling successful in their workplace. Do employees have the resources (including time, support, and mentorship) to adequately do their job without overwork? Why not? Whose responsibility is it to fix? (The authors do not believe it is the employee's responsibility to fix an unsupportive or overburdened workplace). There are mentoring programs available for self-motivated people like PeMento: Peer Mentoring for Mid-career Library Professionals[3] and community support for BIPOC workers in librarianship through We Here.[4] For true and meaningful change to happen, the work cannot just be done by community organizations or peer mentoring. It must be done by management and leadership to intentionally facilitate

[1] https://kaetrenadaviskendrick.wordpress.com/published-articles/

[2] https://renewalslis.com/trainings/#Coaching

[3] https://pemento.wordpress.com/

[4] https://www.wehere.space/

change the culture of an organization. We Here notes that:

> The people in the private communities are doing the work institutions and professional organizations have not yet built into the fabric of our professions and We Here hopes to uplift, celebrate, and embed this work into our professional worlds.

Conclusion

The pandemic stories we have presented illustrate how the pervasiveness of role overload, capitalist norms, and white supremacy culture persist in the authors' experiences working in an academic library before and throughout the pandemic. In examining these reflections, we propose that workers - especially leaders - within organizations can name and, where possible, resist policies and practices that normalize overwork and role overload, dehumanization, and vocational awe.

Organizations that do not examine how the pandemic strained already overloaded employees may have challenges retaining workers, as emotional exhaustion associated with burnout is associated with turnover of employees (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Arshadi & Shahbazi, 2013). With reflective practices and mindful management, there is a more humane and thoughtful way. Library leaders can facilitate intentional, critical conversations about resisting dehumanization, role overload, and vocational awe, and they can explore how managers can best support the humans that keep the work moving forward. A compassionate leadership and work culture that intentionally seeks to address sources of workplace stress and suffering can be one strategy to improve employee well-being and reduce burnout, whether in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic or not (Buonomi et al., 2022). A holistic assessment of how the library was working, how it worked during the pandemic, and how the work has (or has not) evolved since returning to campus is an essential task we recommend for all organizations. There are multiple future opportunities for research in this area including assessment of academic libraries that have successfully implemented compassionate leadership and organizational practices, and studies of librarians leaving the profession because of burnout or working conditions during COVID-19.

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