

THE INTERNAL WORLD OF LIBRARIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF CIVILITY

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ABSTRACT

The internal environment of libraries is a world more complex than its stereotypical image as a place of calm and quiet. The nature of conflict in libraries is as complex, sophisticated and hidden as the detailed process of buying, cataloguing and putting a new book on the shelf. This paper will identify qualities of organizational culture of libraries that have sustained its activities for centuries. This organizational culture is straining under the pressure of internal and external issues. As librarians respond to new technology and user group needs, they do so as a divided profession. Libraries are now populated with individuals from four distinct generations. As libraries undergo reorganization to preserve their values and role in society, institutional goals, values and processes now become areas of negotiation and spaces of contention. The need "to change in order to preserve" raises the level of internal tension. Unchecked, group consensus or civilized disagreement can morph into mobbing and bullying activities that terrorize library workplaces. This paper will describe how mobbing and bullying can flourish in libraries and conclude with strategies to counter and quash such acts before individuals are harmed in insidious and devastating ways.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

As libraries evolved over centuries, the organizational culture of the institution was established. It is a subtle feature of a workplace, transmitted either directly, through employee training, or indirectly, as general socialization in day-to-day working. Through direct and indirect means, shared meaning of various functional areas of the library such as reference, reader's advisory, or cataloguing and shared values, such as access to information, are communicated and reinforced. The organizational culture in libraries is woven throughout the structure of personnel, process of completing tasks, flow of communication, (including what, when and how) and degree of interdependence among staff.¹⁻² Organizational culture provides stability to an organization. As the library culture comes under pressure from external and internal stresses, the push to change elements of its activities impacts organizational culture and a complementary space, organizational climate.

The social space of an organization is composed of two related areas, organizational culture and climate. Culture, which has already been presented, is the objective representation of institutional values; climate is the subjective perception of employees towards their work environment.³ In order to be significant and permanent, any changes to the organization must involve changes in patterns of behaviour, supported by changes in fundamental beliefs and values.⁴ While it is more common to refer to organizational culture, changes in a library will be felt much stronger in its climate. Whenever the organizational climate is stressed, research confirms that service quality, effectiveness, worker morale and employee turnover rates are also affected.³ The stable membership of library employees and particular work activities cement common attitudes about the workplace, both positive and negative.⁵ Differences (such as occupational or generational) between library administration, professional librarians, and other library staff can even lead to sub-cultures within one library.⁶ In this way, the psychological environment or climate may be experienced and managed quite differently by each group.³

The library as an institution and its workers have been experiencing a variety of external and internal pressures, much of which has been thoroughly discussed in the professional literature and need only be summarized here. The traditional model of libraries emphasized the collection, maintenance and preservation of sources of information and librarians were individuals with expert knowledge and navigation skills within the complex system.⁷ The needs of the library and its ongoing welfare were primary. The introduction of technology has had a cataclysmic impact on every corner of libraries. From the expectations of users to the way those needs are met, technology permeates library operations.⁸ User needs are now considered primary. This philosophy affects the library's ability to deliver service quickly, efficiently, in ways that satisfy the user and eliminate obstacles to accessing library resources.⁹⁻¹⁰ Globalization of information has created a more extensive, diverse patron base than libraries have ever experienced.¹¹ Libraries can now connect and share resources with other institutions far away. Traditional services are still needed, even with the demand for new and expanded services. Library users seek greater convenience and value for their time and money.⁹⁻¹⁰

This new environment has been imposed without a concomitant change in libraries' value system. Librarians are required to be both generalists and specialists. Library staff feel pressure to incorporate technology into their workplace while sustaining the values and activities of the traditional library. While time spent on some tasks has been reduced or eliminated, other employees with different skill sets are needed to fill new roles, especially related to technology development and maintenance.¹² New workflows require change in behaviour and activities.⁸ The clash of old values and new expectations lead to contradictory objectives, worker role confusion and psychological instability. Stress is not recognized or managed in this new environment of more public service hours, wider variety of tasks, and diminished control over workload.^{8,13} While users perform their own searches and use other non-library resources, library staff fear devaluing of skills

and irrelevancy in the evolving information age.⁷ The last two decades of substantial change has seen upheaval experienced by library users and staff.¹⁴

MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKPLACES

The presence of several generations of workers in the same library challenges library responsiveness and adaptability. Recent demographic studies in Canada, the United States, and Australia indicate four generations of workers present in libraries. Table 1 identifies four generational groups and common features of each group. In demographic terms, a generation or cohort spans approximately 20 years.¹⁵ Historical events, economic experiences, and social upheaval shape generational identity. These generations have been identified in popular culture by the age range of the workforce, however one author notes that a common mindset is more relevant than one's year of birth.¹⁵

Table 1: General descriptions of four generational groups working in libraries*

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
<i>Year range of birth</i>	Prior to 1946	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1981	1982 – 2000
<i>Present Age</i>	62 – 79	40 – 61	24 – 44	22 –
<i>General Characteristics</i>	Loyal, faithful, conservative	Idealistic, independent, question authority	Self-reliant, adaptive to change	Collaborative, culturally sensitive, media-literate
<i>Attitudes towards institutions</i>	Loyalty & respect	Change possible with commitment	Suspicion, potential sources of unbalance	Judged on their own merit
<i>Experience in libraries</i>	Card catalogue	From closed to open stacks – still card catalogue	Introduction of computers, email, OCLC, Dialog, Infotrac	Internet including Google, Web 2.0

* Information for this chart was gathered from several sources. The sources are: Lancaster LC. The click and clash of generations: four generations at work means four distinct mindsets that collide every day, for better or worse. *Library Journal* [online] 2003;128(17): 36; Hill K. Defy the decades with multigenerational teams. *Nursing Management* 2004; 35(1):32-35; and Kapoun J. Generation X and Y meet the Baby Boomers at the Library. *LOEX of the West*;2004 Jun 2-4; Boise, Idaho. <http://library.boisestate.edu/loex2004/presentations/KapounLOEX2004.ppt>

In the last decade, the distribution of generational groups has been well-documented in the library literature. Initiated by concerns over the wave of upcoming retirements of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, several surveys provide details of the distribution of multiple generations in the library workplace and the working life experiences of library staff. Statistics confirm the large numbers of librarians in the Traditionalist and Baby Boomer generations presently working in all types of libraries (see figure 1). In all three countries, the librarian complement is divided somewhat evenly into generational groups by thirds¹⁶. In the United States, the percentage of librarian population over age 45 increased from 42% to 65% while the median age of Australian librarians is 46.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ In Canada, more than one-quarter or 25% of librarians are over the age of 55, which is double the rate of other Canadian workers, which is only 11%.¹⁶ From 2001 to 2006, recent entrants to the profession increased in Canada from 18% to 21% of the total library workforce; their growing numbers have started to have an impact on organizational culture and operations.¹⁶

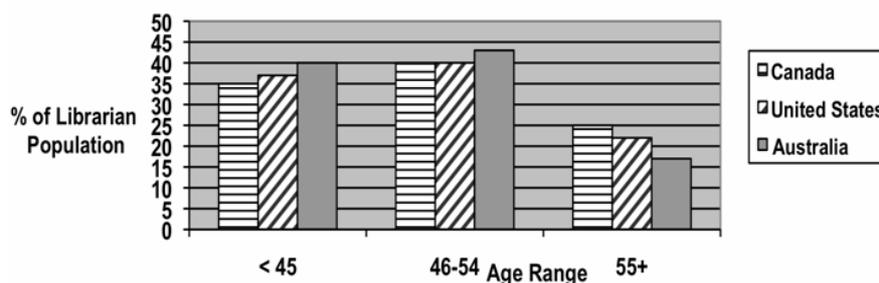


Figure 1: Age ranges of librarians by country

Generational groups hold differing perceptions and opinions about a range of professional topics. Overall, loyalty and longevity have traditionally been rewarded in libraries. Statistics support the high level of institutional longevity; librarians work over 15 years, on average, at the same institution.¹⁵ For Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, this continuity has led to positions of authority and decision-making.¹⁹ Longevity at the same institution and numerical dominance of senior professionals may also explain the stability of the profession overall as well as the perpetuation of operations and values in individual libraries. Generation X and Millennial librarians have described current library management as “risk averse:” closed to new ideas, new individuals and new ways of operating.¹⁴ These librarians suggest senior professionals have learned the operations of “their” library and have no experiential sense of the challenges and stresses of being a “new person.”²⁰ In contrast, a survey of librarians working for five years or less indicates that 81% have changed jobs at least once since becoming a professional.¹⁹ More troubling, another survey in 2005 revealed how at least half of younger librarians said they had

considered leaving the profession.²¹ This common frustration felt by both American and English junior librarians should raise alarms about the future status of libraries. The potential loss or continued negative climate of junior professional librarians can contribute to an unhealthy organizational culture and increase the potential for disagreement and conflict.

The workplace arena illustrates the clash of opinions about library issues that serve to heighten tension and increase the possibility of brief or sustained conflict among library staff.^{14, 18, 22-23} While it is risky to generalize about people's attitudes within a generational group, for the purposes of illustration and explanation, examples can demonstrate how equally valid perceptions and values can clash among library professionals. Hernon, Powell and Young surveyed the perceptions of existing Association of Research Libraries (ARL) directors and non-ARL directors, asking them to rate qualities of success and effectiveness. Several years later, the authors updated their research by surveying a cohort of Gen-X librarians.²⁴ When comparing the ratings between groups, only 17.5% of the attributes chosen by Gen-X librarians *ranked as highly* in the other two lists.²⁴ The lack of agreement between the generations on leadership qualities illustrates the lack of consensus among library professionals. In this case, the differences could have important human resource implications. Directors may bypass Generation-X librarians for promotion and professional development opportunities if they have not valued, and hence not developed, the particular qualities deemed important. Without these types of investigations of perceptions across generational groups, misunderstandings can develop and persist among librarian colleagues.

Even though they enter the field with similar values, the translation of these values into library operations, policies and workplaces can be very different for each generation. Based on a combination of one's age, skills and knowledge, number of years at the library, all of these factors can affect the perceptions and behaviours of librarians. Shepstone and Currie's research illustrate this issue in their analysis of organizational values at one academic library.⁴ Both junior and senior librarians were asked about current and future organizational values. In the initial assessment, *both* groups described the current direction of the library as having the same qualities and objectives. When asked what the future values and direction should be, the two groups *diverged substantially*. The senior librarians placed the same importance as current circumstances whereas the junior librarians supported a direction that emphasized more collaboration. This exercise demonstrates how generational groups can create different, but equally valid, professional perspectives. Through this investigation, the librarians at this institution avoided potentially chaotic future planning situations. Instead, this analysis gave all groups a way to articulate and negotiate library values and objectives.

A review of the issues explored thus far reveals multiple factors that enhance the possibility of tension and conflict within libraries. The external environment creates dynamics that challenge the traditional operations of libraries and roles of librarians. The stress and pressure introduced into the system is exacerbated by the

generational differences and misunderstandings occurring in every type of library. Individuals respond according to their personal and organizational experiences. Assumptions are found in the thoughts and behaviours of library members; initiatives that do not conform to traditional library values and these assumptions meet with resistance, fear or rejection.⁹ The result is an evolution from general workplace incivility to outright bullying and mobbing.

MOBBING AND BULLYING IN LIBRARIES

Workplace harassment leaves a deep, enduring impact on the careers and lives of individuals. While other forms of interpersonal conflict at work are well-researched, the body of knowledge about mobbing and bullying as workplace harassment continues to be developed.²⁵ The topic is difficult to research because of its subjective and insidious nature. Both terms imply escalating acts of aggression in a systematic way.²⁶⁻²⁷ Both forms of harassment have been described as a pattern of predominantly observable behaviours, over a period of time greater than six months.²⁸⁻²⁹ The intention is to humiliate, stigmatize and/or discredit a co-worker.³⁰ European researchers use the term “mobbing;” British and North America researchers use the broad term “bullying.”³¹ Bullying and mobbing differ in the position of the instigator or “perpetrator” of the acts. Bullying is defined as aggressive or negative actions of one individual, usually a supervisor or someone in a “perceived” position of greater power, against another person.^{26 29} Mobbing is a term used to describe the actions of more than one person, usually a group of colleagues, towards an individual.²⁶⁻²⁷

Mobbing and bullying occur in all types of organizations, though more research has been conducted in health and social service organizations. Large, highly representative studies in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom indicate a prevalence range (based on self-report rates) of between 1 to 4%.^{27 31} When studies asked workers to identify from a list of negative behaviours, the figure jumps to as high as 10 to 25% of workers being a target.³² These figures match other studies that indicate at least one-quarter of the adult working population will experience some mobbing or bullying tactics in their working lifetime.^{25-26 28} When this author discussed the matter with colleagues, five confirming responses were received in 24 hours.³³ The details of library experiences reinforced the research with disturbing accuracy.³⁴

While a majority of workers never experience or witness mobbing or bullying in the workplace, research that focuses on the experiences of targets reveal a similar process of escalation.³³ The triggering or instigating situation that sets up the dynamic of “opposing” parties is most often an unresolved work issue or disagreement that actually becomes the smallest part of the whole bullying or mobbing experience.²⁷ “Opposing” is a relative term since it has been shown how members from different generations may hold legitimately different perspectives

about a range of library topics. However, once positions are established, the actions of the perpetrator focus on assaulting the professional reputation, social relations, workplace communication and even quality of work of the target.²⁶ In a mobbing situation, these actions can occur over the course of weeks, by many individuals, each contributing to the assault. In the beginning, the actions may be regular but subtle enough that the target may not piece together the whole process. In retrospect, the target can explain how the workplace changed.²⁷

Pioneering Swedish researcher Harold Leymann has identified up to 45 different negative behaviours that encompass mobbing or bullying.²⁸ Keashly's study of workplace abuse in North America identified numerous acts between co-workers such as yelling, screaming, threatening, aggressive eye contact, aggressive gossip, refusing to communicate, criticizing or humiliating someone in front of others, insults, isolation and/or withholding information or resources.²⁹⁻³⁰ When this author listened to a wide range of behaviours in the discussions with other librarians about being a target or a witness to mobbing or bullying experience, examples included regular, insidious derision of a colleague's opinions or behaviours in the person's absence, rumours, demeaning work characterization, negative opinions in the form of questions or ignoring the target's input in meetings or committees.³³ Mobbing examples provided by librarians included excessive monitoring of break, lunch and meeting times; criticizing reference interactions; or walking past the individual without acknowledgement. In the library environment, the shift or desk schedule can be used to indirectly reward some and punish others with quiet or busy times or scheduling known enemies together. It has been the author's experience at several libraries that scheduling in any capacity is not a desired activity. Therefore, the individual who takes on this duty may be given extra allowances in many (un-related) areas, which have the potential to be abused.³³ Communication lines are changed so information is withheld from the target or training scheduled when the target is absent and then criticism later for not being able to use the technology. The target is not given the proper resources or support to complete work effectively or is given minimal, humiliating or meaningless work as a way of encouraging the target's departure.^{28 33} If the target stays in the job, criticism and social isolation could persist as colleagues distance themselves or become passive enablers, witnesses in the process. Other colleagues may join in the aggression even though they do not agree with the behaviour, either out of respect for the perpetrator or to avoid being a target themselves.²⁷

THE EXPERIENCE AND IMPACT OF MOBBING AND BULLYING

There are no typical qualities of bully, mob or target in the research literature. Targets and perpetrators can be of either gender and may be at any stage in their career, from entrant to senior level. Research suggests that the perpetrator may rate low on social competence and high on social anxiety and/or aggressiveness

scales.^{31, 35} The target may rate low on social competence; however, researchers have also identified this group overall as creative, principled individuals in the workplace who often demonstrate exceptional accomplishment and commitment to work.^{27 35} As one researcher described, the target's problem

“...was that they clashed with the norms of the work group to which they belonged. It is likely that in this case, the victim's [target's] conscientiousness went against a group culture characterized by rigidity and low tolerance for diversity. These victims [targets] were probably perceived as constant annoyances or even threats to the work group to which they belonged. As a consequence, the group may have started to harass these individuals, either to enforce conformity or to get rid of the person.”³⁴

This comment is particularly disturbing in light of numerous surveys of the library profession that indicate a high degree of unresponsiveness to change experienced by junior library professionals. These recent entrants to the library field describe how bureaucracy, lack of openness to new ideas and rigid administration stifles initiative and a willingness to contribute to the library.^{14 21} In addition, librarians' longevity has positive and negative implications for mobbing and bullying. Library staff can have strong connections with their colleagues and a time of proven performance at their particular institution; at the same time, disagreements can solidify into long-standing conflict. Co-workers who do not participate in mobbing are still witness to the toxic behaviour and feel a similar stress, reduced work engagement and commitment as the target.³⁰ The cost is high for all individuals in some libraries.

The short- and long-term costs of mobbing and bullying in the workplace are substantial. While there has been no proven direct relationship between bullying and symptoms such as depression, prolonged stress disorder and substance abuse, researchers have identified strong relationships between exposures to many of the tactics listed above and low levels of job satisfaction, increased job-related stress and stronger turnover intentions.²⁶ Targets frequently reported feelings of shame and humiliation at being victimized by co-workers or superiors and there was little social support to counter the messages of personal and professional failure.^{35 39-40} Namie and Namie listed a range of symptoms from lack of confidence, humiliation and guilt, obsessive thoughts, inability to concentrate and difficulties sleeping.³⁹ These symptoms are similar to the constellation of elements in post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁷

COUNTERING MOBBING AND BULLYING IN LIBRARIES

Bullying and mobbing requires individuals to instigate, perpetuate and tolerate the behaviour. Research from the business and organizational behaviour literature reveals that mobbing and bullying behaviour breeds in chaotic environments with

weak leadership, some degree of job insecurity, nebulous task or work roles, indistinct performance measures and strong conformity to organizational culture.^{28 31} Unfortunately, surveys of librarians indicate all of these elements exist in libraries today. The description of new professional roles suggests libraries are grappling with a fast-changing environment.⁸ However, new hires in these jobs may be vulnerable to vague job descriptions or contradictory responsibilities.³⁴ More than two-thirds of librarians report performing a wider variety of tasks than five years ago; only half found their workload manageable.⁸ Organizational structures and practices appear to contribute to chaotic work environment but the system level is the place where any changes will have the most impact on a library's culture.⁴³ Without strong or clear leadership, libraries are vulnerable to rudderless activity and decision-making by peer pressure.

Lack of effective management training and strong leadership are necessary factors to sustain bullying and mobbing behaviour. Since the target is often described as resistant, disloyal or insubordinate, the most common organizational response to bullying or mobbing allegations is denial.^{25 27 29} Since the target has been experiencing escalating abuse for at least six months before mentioning the issue, their increasingly defensive position is used against them.²⁷ Even when target does speak up, the situation is usually framed as a personality conflict.³⁴ Unfortunately, management and supervision skills are not widespread or valued skills in this profession. In Canada, more than 70% of librarians are currently working as supervisors or managers while only half of those surveyed received *any* management training.⁸ When queried about the value placed on this professional role, *less than half* were interested in management and only 40% were interested in supervision.⁸

Lack of training or interest in management is felt in libraries' organizational climate. Research about retention indicates respondents rank the organization as the lowest factor for staying in their job. Among librarians who do stay at the same institution for a decade or longer, 80% of them report a lack of organizational commitment in terms of its policies, planning and communication practices.⁴¹ From individuals who left the profession, their "... negative comments focused on management style and performance, lack of communication, lack of leadership and even unethical behaviour."⁴¹ Almost all librarians are concerned about employee-supervisor interactions but only 77% of Canadian librarians believe they are treated with respect by their superiors.⁸ Librarians who conducted a study for the Association of College and Research Libraries noted "more time needs to be applied to properly train administrators instead of just promoting individuals with the highest seniority."² This lack of attention and worth ascribed to supervision offers a possible contributing factor for the potential and real existence of mobbing and bullying behaviours in libraries. Without adequate training or ongoing motivation, the varied acts and actors in a bullying or mobbing situation create a complexity beyond the scope of many supervisors or managers expertise. In most situations, the common conclusion of the situation is the target leaves the organization.³⁴

SOLUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Libraries are not exempt from interpersonal conflict, especially the particular dynamics of bullying and mobbing. Interpersonal relationships, interdependence of work groups and long-standing professional values complicate attempts by anyone to unravel the strands that lead to conflict in libraries. The fact of four generations at work in the same institutions must be addressed in working groups, committees and professional development sessions in order to reduce the potential for conflict. One of the most common complaints from all generational groups is the lack of listening by other groups to differing perspectives.^{14 21-22} Solutions that focus on ways and means for professionals to talk in non-threatening environments about ideas, projects and work-styles will enhance overall library effectiveness. Libraries with additional work-life balance programs or specific initiatives around professional development, mentoring and succession planning will retain the most positive and effective librarians.^{2 11 16} The lack of management training appears to be a circumstance that has led to a “generational effect” of poor supervision within libraries that contribute to poor behaviour by employees. As indicated, more than half of librarians supervise at some point in their career. Specific institutional sessions supported by library administration, combined with general library management courses, should be a priority for libraries that want to develop individuals who can perform outreach, instruction and reference services to all patrons with a positive mindset and contribute ideas of change in an encouraging work environment.

The progression of a mobbing or bullying situation leaves no one or nothing untouched, not the target, the bully, the mob, the witnesses, the supervisor or the library. In the current environment, libraries may spend more time and attention on meeting organizational objectives, proving value to the institution and being competitive in the broader information world. The ephemeral nature of organizational culture makes it easy to deny or ignore. However, libraries that discount this area are operating without the full energy and engagement of their engine of production: their employees. As indicated, turnover rates are not necessarily an accurate sign of organizational health. Libraries that choose to embrace differences of opinion and seek contributions from all employees regardless of age or professional tenure will benefit from higher quality service delivery and operations.

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