Library Working Conditions
and the **COVID-19 Pandemic**

Eamon Tewell
Head of Research Support & Outreach, Columbia University
@eamontewell

Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship Program
ALA Annual Conference, June 23–29, 2021

Land acknowledgement

I am a settler on the traditional homelands of the Lenni Lenape and Canarsee people. New York City, and all of the United States, was founded upon the overtaking of land through the attempted genocide of Indigenous people. Native land underpins everything about life in the United States. Our homes, schools, recreation, agriculture, and businesses are all made possible because Native people were displaced from their ancestral lands.

Learn more and donate:

- First Nations COVID-19 Response Fund: firstnations.org/covid-19-emergency-response-fund
- Manna-hatta Fund: mannahattafund.org

About me
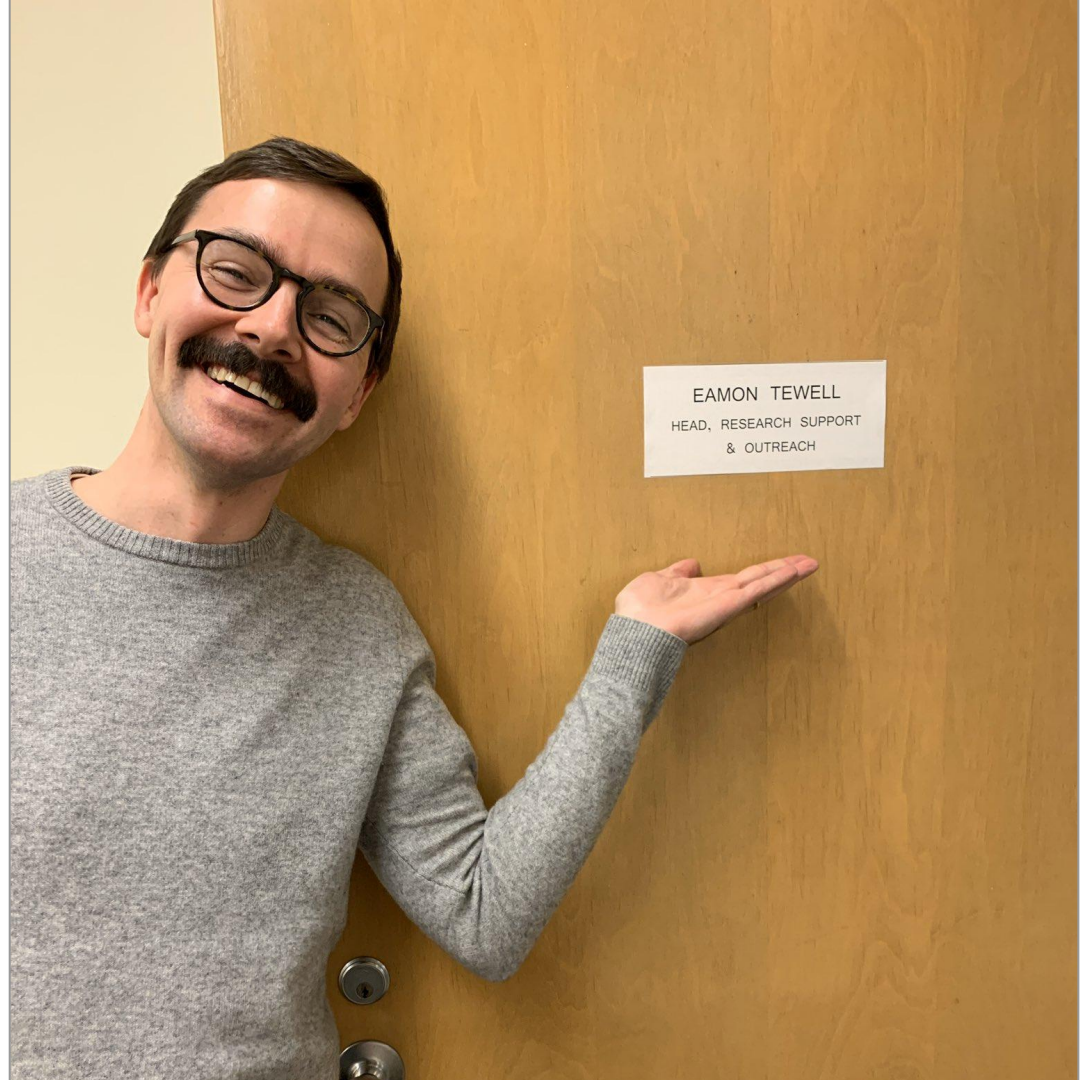
The pandemic didn't create poor working conditions, but it has compounded and intensified them.

The pandemic didn't create poor working conditions, but it has compounded and intensified them.

This last year has been unimaginably difficult for many people. It's ok to not be ok.

Work–life balance

- A flawed idea even before the pandemic, as frames work and everything else in one's life as deserving equal consideration

- Ignores the uncompensated yet equally demanding reproductive labor frequently performed by women, such as care work and domestic labor

- Impossible to achieve in libraries when we continually take on new duties, which many did during the pandemic

- We need to decide what not to do, and trust library workers that they know what they need to do good work and how to best accomplish it

The Pandemic Has Created A New Kind Of Burnout, Which Makes Well-Being More Critical Than Ever

Naz Beheshti Contributor ⓘ

ForbesWomen

CEO-Prananaz, Executive Coach, Author of Pause. Breathe. Choose.

MENTAL HEALTH

Life Kit: Pandemic Burnout

April 11, 2021 · 4:51 PM ET
Heard on All Things Considered

What Is Pandemic Burnout and How Do We Overcome It?

Humans are creatures of habit. We function best and feel most comfortable within the pre-established systems we've constructed and refined over the years.

CAREER FEATURE | 15 March 2021

Pandemic burnout is rampant in academia

Remote working, research delays and childcare obligations are taking their toll on scientists, causing stress and anxiety.

Pandemic burnout: Do you have it and what can you do about it?

As the coronavirus crisis goes on, an increasing number of us are feeling worn out and unable to cope. Here's how you can tell if this is burnout, and what you can do to protect yourself

We Have All Hit a Wall

Confronting late-stage pandemic burnout, with everything from edibles to Exodus.

Burnout

- Should be understood as exploitation by an employer; burnout doesn't just happen, it's due to unrealistic demands and taking advantage of workers who give too much time and energy

- Not something that can solved through individual choices; the only way to stop burnout is to disrupt systems

- Self-care and self-preservation are necessary and important, but they should not be tied to being productive

- Self-care is not a solution in itself; we can't self-care our way out of systemic inequalities

Low morale in libraries

- The result of "repeated and protracted exposure to emotional, verbal, written, and system abuse or neglect in the workplace" (Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Public Librarian Low-Morale Experience: A Qualitative Study," 2020)

- Presents a host of issues for personal mental and physical health, professional practice, and overall workplace culture, many of which can be long-term

- Particularly pronounced during and as a result of the pandemic's effects

zandashé l'orelia brown
@zandashe

I dream of never being called resilient again in my life.

I'm exhausted by strength. I want support. I want softness. I want ease. I want to be amongst kin. Not patted on the back for how well I take a hit. Or for how many.

8:02 PM · May 18, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

Resilience and library labor

- Resilience is "a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance" (Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life*, 2017)

- Most often attributed to institutions, which are proclaimed resilient, while workers are expected to perform it

- Redirects accountability from those in leadership positions to those with the least amount of power

- A more palatable and succinct way of saying, "thanks for putting up with an untenable situation so we don't have to make meaningful changes"

Toxic positivity

- The belief that people should maintain a positive mindset regardless of their situation

- Results in shame, guilt, and compartmentalizing among people who aren't feeling positive emotions

- Seeks to delegitimize experiences and expressions of sadness, anxiety, and fear; intersects with "professionalism" as well as race and gender

Key Characteristics of a Successful Team Member in this Work Unit:

- **Creative Thinking** – Goes beyond the boundaries of the job description, willingly takes on new challenges, finds creative solutions rather than always awaiting direct instructions.
- **Helpful Nature** – Offers to help lighten the load for others in times of need. Volunteers rather than waiting to be asked. Understands that almost no one works in a silo and needs the help of others to do their job well; recognizes that by helping others first, others will likely reciprocate.
- **Optimistic** – Is friendly, tirelessly cordial, polite, and genial. Comes in to work with a good attitude and doesn't bring their own personal "little black clouds" into the work environment.
- **Reliable** – Does what they say they will do, when they say they will do it. Shows up for work when expected. Doesn't push the burden of work volume or deadlines to others.
- **Teamwork** – Genuinely values teamwork and co-workers; make them feel valuable and important by acknowledging what they do well. Doesn't expect from others effort that one is unwilling to do themselves. Finds ways to acknowledge others' strong suits.

How library workers can respond

- Push back against "more with less"

How library workers can respond

- Push back against "more with less"

- Do what you can to protect your time and boundaries, while recognizing it's ultimately on your employer

How library workers can respond

- Push back against "more with less"

- Do what you can to protect your time and boundaries, while recognizing it's ultimately on your employer

- Keep work flexibility and accessibility practices that should have existed all along

How library workers can respond

- Push back against "more with less"

- Do what you can to protect your time and boundaries, while recognizing it's ultimately on your employer

- Keep work flexibility and accessibility practices that should have existed all along

- Resist capitalist and white supremacist work cultures

Recommended readings

- Brown, Laila. "Recalibrating Librarians' Service Ethic in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Towards a Mutually Empowering Framework." *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* (2020): 95-106. qqml-journal.net/index.php/qqml/article/view/634

- Kendrick, Kaetrena Davis, and Ione T. Damasco. "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians: An Experiential Study." *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 174-212. ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac/64

- Seale, Maura, and Rafia Mirza. "The Coin of Love and Virtue: Academic Libraries and Value in a Global Pandemic." *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 6 (2020): 1-30. doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.34457

- Sloniowski, Lisa. "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian." *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645-666. yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/31500

Slides:

tinyurl.com/COVIDConditions

Contact:

eamontewell.com
eamon.tewell@columbia.edu
@eamontewell