



Librarianship: Calling or Career?

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Vocational Awe

Fobazi Ettarh (2018)

Vocational awe describes the ways that the perception of libraries as “inherently good” and are idealized, so much so that it places them out of the context of being a greater institution that reflects the white-supremacy and patriarchal society it exists in (Ettarh 2018). The disillusionment is the contrast between the staff being so enamored with the job that they dismiss or overlook the systemic issues in their field. For example, praising the libraries as being places for all and providing equal opportunity without acknowledging that libraries have a lack of diversity in staff demographics and are places where political motives and discrimination are being played out seen in the recent waves of book banning. The focus on the idealized version of libraries leads staff members to individualize their problems related to burnout and job creep and see shortcomings as an intrinsic failing rather than a reflection of the greater work environment and exploitation of their labor.

Have you heard of the concept “vocational awe”?		
%	“Yes”	“No”
	31.5	68.5
N	82	178

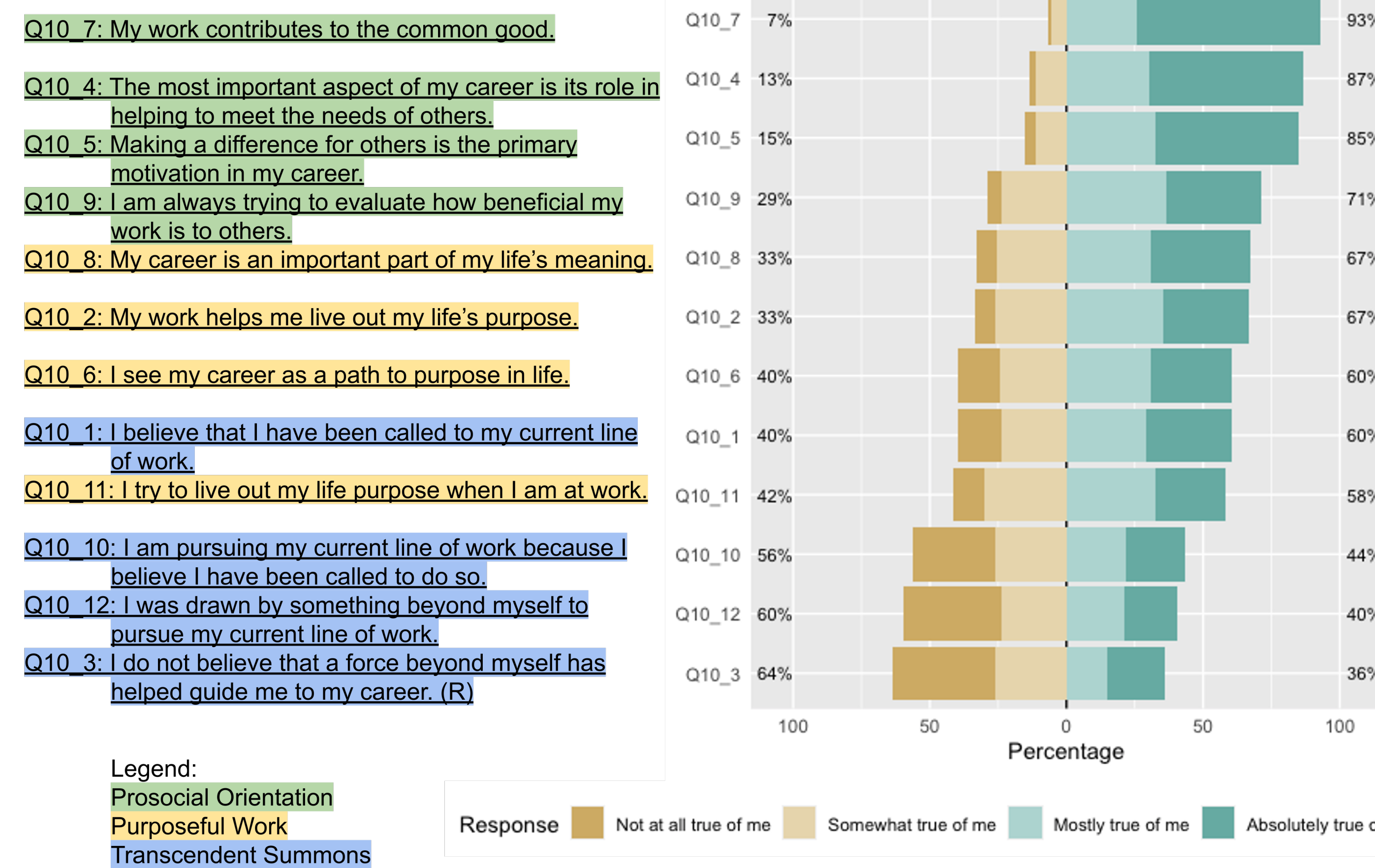
The Library Faith

Robert Leigh (1950)

The notion of the library faith, as delineated by Leigh in 1950, encapsulates the reverence and idealism surrounding librarianship, transcending mere job descriptions to imbue the profession with a mystical quality. Leigh posits that librarians are perceived as possessing an indefinable “magical” quality in their roles, suggesting that their responsibilities extend beyond the tangible tasks outlined in their job descriptions. Coupled with the role of spreading nationalism, this perspective instills a sense of duty and devotion among librarians, framing their work as integral to the education and socialization of their communities

Have you heard of the concept “the library faith”?		
%	“Yes”	“No”
	5.0	95.0
N	13	248

Calling and Vocation Questionnaire: Likert Distribution



Job creep is a common phenomenon in librarianship, with 77.4% of respondents stating that they are now expected to do tasks that are outside of their job description. The overarching devotion of staff members to their work is reflected in 67.8% of respondents making sacrifices to be in their current line of work.

I have assumed tasks outside of my initial job description that have now become part of what is expected of me.			I have had to make sacrifices to be in my current line of work.			
	“Yes”	“Unsure”	“No”	“Yes”	“Unsure”	“No”
%	77.4	8.4	14.2	67.8	10.0	22.2
N	202	22	37	177	26	58

“I went into it [public library job] like optimistic. You know, like I l've, you know, I'm aware of like vocational awe and like, like any job, it's flawed. And, you know, like. Especially like historically, you know, with segregation, like...the public library doesn't have like a great history. So I was aware of all of that but I was hopeful because I've had like most of my library experience has been tangential or like behind the scenes stuff and not like working at the desk at the library. So I was hopeful and excited. And pretty quickly realized that the concepts that I'm learning about, the things that my friends and I talk about aren't valued or priorities within the library and you know through conversations that most people think that this is like specific to [their library] and that other libraries are probably better. But I, I don't know, I kind of hesitate with that. Not to say that like, All libraries are like this, but. It feels like a broader problem where some libraries are the exceptions.” (River)

Sacrifices Made:

- Time spent with her 2 young kids –Emily
- Moved in with mother-in-law – Natalie
- Moved back in with parents and took a salary decrease – Grace
- Unable to prepare for retirement - Amelia

When asked about vocational awe, those who had heard of it found it helpful for depersonalizing the negative experiences of the job and were able to point to a structural mismanagement or failing.

Methodology

Participants were public library staff members in North Carolina. The survey conducted (N=272) featured asking whether staff felt their work was a job, career/vocation, or a calling. The Calling and Vocation Questionnaire developed by Dik et al (2012) was used to get a more detailed breakdown of the elements present in feeling called. Job atmosphere questions used by Alice Bryan in the 1950 Public Library Inquiry to compare current perception and past perception. Lastly, respondents were asked about the presence of job creep and sacrifice embedded within the job. There were no significant differences attributed to demographic differences, but seeing the work as a job, career/vocation, or calling was a determinant in if expectations for the work were met.

Interviews (N=25) focused on elaborating on the elements of the survey: learn about what motivates library staff, if they perceive this motivation as a calling, and their interpretation of any negative work experiences. The interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of why survey responses were chosen and how they interpreted the questions. It also provided anecdotal evidence of experiences that fueled the interviewees views of their work life.

Calling or Career?

The majority of respondents experience librarianship as a career/vocation. This is validated by the distribution of the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire responses which indicate a ~20 percentage point difference between the average percent responding “absolutely” or “mostly” true with the CVQ statements.

%	I experience librarianship as a:		
	“Job”	“Career / Vocation”	“Calling”
	18.8	65.1	16.1
N	49	170	42

“When they offered me the position it was a salary decrease for me. So, but I will say I knew it was a calling to come to this library and this position, because, I mean, everything will work out, it was that kind of a feeling. So I did. And I made the move, and I took a salary cut, and had to move back in with my parents temporarily. And well, I should say right away, when I moved and started working at this library, I knew that they were a well oiled machine. Everybody is super nice. Everybody works hard. And it's like nobody on staff, do you have to explain the importance of what you are doing? Choices and the daily value of what you are doing. You do not have to explain that because it's all understood.” (Grace)

Others did not like the religious connotations of calling but agreed with the sentiment.

“When I think of a calling, it seems like a religious sort of vocation. I'm not a religious sort of person, but at the same time, I mean, I think a calling is when something that you feel called to do or something that's kind of deeper than just a career to make some money. So I guess if you think about it in those terms, I guess it would be a calling.” (Isabelle)

Interviewees commented that the emotional labor was a part of the job that made it fulfilling, but also tiring.

“If we're in this work, it is because we care about people. You know, I think a lot of people were like, oh, you look at a library, you love books. I'm like, looks are great, but you shouldn't get into this field if it's just because of books. You should get into this field knowing that your main job is working with people. And people come to you in all kinds of ways and all kinds of. Places in life. I've helped people, you know, print out stuff for their kids birthdays. I've had people come in who, every week, come in and do their online classes and then they come in when they say, I graduated. Yeah, that's so sweet. And then you get the other side of it where you help people print out obituaries. I'm so sorry. I will definitely help you format this. I wish you weren't burying your child.' You know, and so I think it would be wild and unrealistic to expect to completely remove emotion. I think the most important thing is knowing how to leave it. Like it is really important for me to try to leave it at work.” (Taylor)

Calling/Vocation Questionnaire	I experience librarianship as a:		
	Job	Career	Calling
Percent responding “absolutely” or “mostly” true			
Q10_7. My work contributes to the common good	77.6	95.9	100
Q10_4. The most important aspect of my career is its role in helping to meet the needs of others	67.3	88.8	100
Q10_5. Making a difference for others is the primary motivation in my career.	61.2	88.2	97.6
Q10_9. I am always trying to evaluate how beneficial my work is to others.	59.2	70	87.8
Q10_8. My career is an important part of my life's meaning.	39.6	68.2	71.4
Q10_2. My work helps me live out my life's purpose.	32.7	68.2	69
Q10_6. I see my career as a path to purpose in life.	26.5	61.2	66.7
Q10_1. I believe that I have been called to my current line of work.	30.6	58.8	100
Q10_11. I try to live out my purpose when I am at work.	36.7	53.8	100
Q10_10. I am pursuing my current line of work because I believe I have been called to do so.	18.4	37.9	69
Q10_12. I was drawn by something beyond myself to pursue my current line of work.	24.5	31.8	90.5
Q10_3. I do not believe that a force beyond myself has helped guide me to my career. (Reversed)	59.2	60.6	81.0
Mean	44.5	65.3	86.1
N	49	170	42

Extent to which library career has fulfilled librarians' expectations.	1950s	2020s
	N:	2196
Very Disappointing	4.9%	1.5%
Somewhat Disappointing	14.6%	11.1%
About as Expected	30.9%	22.1%
Somewhat More Satisfying than Expected	27.4%	37.0%
Much More Satisfying than Expected	22.2%	28.2%
Chi-squared		0.000002

Expectations more than met rose by 10% (somewhat) and 6% (much more). Overall, most respondents (across both time periods) found librarianship to be more satisfying than disappointing regarding their expectations

Sources

- Bryan Alice I. Robert D. Leigh and Social Science Research Council (U.S.). Public Library Inquiry. 1952. The Public Librarian; a Report of the Public Library Inquiry. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dik, Bryan J., Brandy M. Eldridge, Michael F. Steger, and Ryan D. Duffy. 2012. “Development and Validation of the Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ) and Brief Calling Scale (BCS).” Journal of Career Assessment 20(3):242–63. doi: 10.1177/1069072711434410.
- Ettarh, Fobazi. 2018. “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves – In the Library with the Lead Pipe.” Retrieved July 25, 2023 (<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>).
- Leigh, Robert. 1950. The Public Library in the United States; the General Report of the Public Library Inquiry. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950.

Fairness of Salary	1950s	2020s
	N:	2196
Very Satisfactory	21.9%	12.6%
Fairly Satisfactory	39.5%	47.7%
Somewhat Unsatisfactory	25.7%	26.7%
Very Unsatisfactory	12.8%	13.0%
Chi-squared:	0.003	
Adequacy of Salary	1950s	2020s
	N:	2196
Very Satisfactory	8.2%	13.5%
Fairly Satisfactory	26.8%	39.2%
Somewhat Unsatisfactory	34.1%	32.3%
Very Unsatisfactory	31.0%	15.0%
Chi-squared	0.00000001	

Despite the overwork and low pay expressed in the interviews, respondents display greater feelings of pay adequacy than in 1950. However, the

People self identified as experiencing librarianship as a job, career/vocation, and a calling. The Calling and Vocation Questionnaire demonstrates that the differences between each experience are ~20 percentage points, clearly demonstrating the stratification of the categories.

The desire to help others and make a meaningful difference in the community and people's lives is the main motivator of staff.
“I just realized I like wanting to be able to help people but on a broader level. Kind of like an emergency room doctor, I always say like ‘treat them and street them,’ and a library seemed like a good vehicle to do that kind of work.” (Taylor)
“What I liked about it was the fact that I was getting to help people and I was getting to make them smile and getting to help them find the things that they were needing, whether it was their books, or just things in general that they were looking for their taxes or just general information.” (Charlotte)
“Being involved with the community, helping out the community, and getting people where they need to be. That is kind of what we do a lot of, is just helping them out. And that's one of the big things I really love doing is helping people who need the help.” (Ava)
“I enjoy helping people and I like this. I do like the structure of it just I go in and just plan out my storytimes and just do it. I like the structure and the whole hierarchy of a library I guess. but I do enjoy helping people. I love finding books for people to find information for people. If I don't know it, I know that I can find someone who does or just get as close to as I can. I can least point people in the right direction. And I think that's really rewarding to me, helping people that way.” (Madison)
“What we do matters. It really does. I can rest when every child can read. What when everybody understands civics and can vote. When everyone you know, what we do is too important to be tired. Not that I can control any of this. But we all do our bit. We do as much as we can... You can do whatever makes you happy. But if you're gonna do it, do it to the best of your ability. And never, never do the minimum. Do it to the best of your ability. So at the end of the day you're proud of even if you didn't achieve that very thing, you're proud of what you did. So that would be my advice to you and everybody that's coming up. Do the best that you can and can help.” (Amelia)