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# When social support by patrons protects against burnout: A study among Italian public library workers

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## Abstract

The study aimed to measure burnout among librarians in a city in Northern Italy, and to identify which demands and resources influence emotional exhaustion and cynicism. In particular, it focused on the relationship with patrons, since in the service sector users are mostly studied as a cause of stress and rarely considered as a source of support for service operators. Hierarchical regressions carried out on data (167 self-administered questionnaires) showed that burnout dimensions are influenced by some socio-demographic and job characteristics, and by the positive and negative aspects of relationships with users. We present some practical implications for library managers, in order to reduce the impact of their patrons' negative behaviour and to improve conditions to facilitate the expression of users' support for workers.

## Keywords

Burnout, Job Demands-Resources model, librarians, users' negative behaviour, users' support

'A falling tree makes more noise than a forest that's growing'.

## Introduction

People tend to think of libraries as quiet and stimulating workplaces (Pagowsky and Rigby, 2014), tranquil, harmonious work settings characterised by cooperation, generosity and intellectual inquiry (Bartlett, 2017). In spite of this, several studies, mainly conducted in recent years, have focused on librarian stress and burnout (Harwell, 2013; Shupe et al., 2015). The greater part of these studies have focused on evaluating whether or not such workers are

exposed to the risk of work-related stress and burnout (Lindén et al., 2016), and empirical results have highlighted that burnout levels are quite high among workers in libraries (Harwell, 2013).

Only a limited amount of research, particularly from the occupational psychology perspective, has examined the possible predictors of burnout among librarians;

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identifying which elements can reduce their burnout and enhance their occupational well-being could be valuable both for increasing knowledge about this (relatively recent) matter of interest, and for possible practical applications in library management. Within the theoretical framework of the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) by Bakker and Demerouti (2007); Demerouti et al. (2001), the aim of this paper is to examine both job and relational demands and resources that can predict the burnout syndrome in a library context. Specific focus will be on the relational dimensions, considering relationships within the work context (with co-workers and supervisors) and towards the exterior (the users).

The impact of relationships with patrons on librarians' quality of work life has been previously investigated, especially in the library management literature (Adebayo et al., 2015; Farrugia, 2002; Hartley, 2015). Moreover, in the past years 'good practice' handbooks devoted to addressing librarians' fatigue with dealing with difficult patrons have been published (Sarkodie-Mensah, 2002; Toot, 2002). However, this is only one side of the coin; as studies conducted in the service sector have highlighted, positive relationships with users (clients, patients, students ...) may act as an important resource for workers, motivating workers or protecting them from burnout, for example, through users' reward and gratitude (Loera et al., 2016; Martini et al., 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2011).

Therefore, the present study considers also the 'other side of the coin', the positive relationships between employees and users, considering job demands and resources and relational demands and resources in the specific context of libraries.

## **Burnout in the library context**

Among studies that have analysed antecedents of burnout among librarians, Shupe et al. (2015) identified workload and role ambiguity as important antecedents of stress and burnout among workers in academic libraries. Lindén et al. (2016), referring to the model developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and Leiter and Maslach (2004), examined the impact on three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, cynicism, personal accomplishment) of six work-life aspects: (a) workload – amount of tasks to do in a limited time (b) job control – possibility of influencing decisions at work, (c) reward – recognition of efforts and competence at work, (d) community – quality of social relationships at work, (e) fairness of treatment; (f) values – coherence between employees' and the organization's values. They concentrated on some established predictors generally considered in the literature on job burnout. Some scholars have analysed antecedents that are more specific to library staff, such as having to use new technology to manage catalogues (Harwell, 2013) or maintaining quality services despite flat or reduced budgets.

Another important group of studies have focused on stressful relationships with the library's clientele. Several research works, both in occupational psychology and in the library management literature, have reported the issue of aggressive behaviour in public libraries in the USA (Albrecht, 2012; Hartley, 2015), in Africa (Adebayo et al., 2015; Oyesiku et al., 2012), in Asia (Kean and McKoy-Johnson, 2009) and in Europe (Farrugia, 2002), more recently also in Italy (Gilardi et al., in press). Patrons can be very exacting; in some situations, they are really aggressive and verbally abusive towards librarians, when they are frustrated because they cannot find what they need, are unable to borrow material from the library or have to wait for a long time (Blessinger and Hrycaj, 2013; Kean and McKoy-Johnson, 2009). A recent criticism refers to 'new' daily attenders who differ greatly from the expected audience composed of students, scholars, bibliophiles, bookworms and so on. In times of crisis, and especially in big towns, a new group of users has emerged, composed of drunks, the homeless, people with mental health problems, unruly youths who can be noisy, violent, sometimes malodorous, in any case difficult to manage unless a security guard is present in the library and the librarians have been trained to deal with these situations (Albrecht, 2012; Farrugia, 2002). In sum, though physical assaults are rare, verbal abuse, by 'normal' patrons or by 'new frequenters', is widespread.

These two branches of research constitute the major corpus of the academic literature on burnout syndrome and focus, respectively, on the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and on the exhausting relationship with users in the specific domain of public and social services.

### *Antecedents of burnout: The Job Demands-Resources model*

Burnout has been defined by Maslach et al. (1996: 4) as 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity'. The term 'burnout' refers to a worker who is drained of energy; he or she cannot continue to work effectively unless there are sufficient resources and these are replaced when necessary (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

The topic of burnout was initially introduced to explain that feeling experienced by care and social professionals who have to deal with intense and continuous contact with individuals who are suffering and in need of care. The one-way direction of continuous caring, and facing pain and sufferance are very draining on an individual's resources. The concept of burnout was subsequently extended to all kinds of professions (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 1996).

The core dimension of burnout syndrome (Shirom, 1989; Westman and Bakker, 2008) is emotional exhaustion, which is the feeling of being overextended and exhausted by the demands of work (Demerouti et al., 2001). In addition to exhaustion, two other dimensions are central for burnout: cynicism, a sort of mental withdrawal from the job, when the worker is no longer able to face the progressive reduction in the available energy for work; and reduced personal accomplishment, a decline in one's feeling of being effective at work owing to a lack of resources (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Demerouti et al. (2001) conclude that burnout syndrome is expressed properly only by emotional exhaustion and cynicism dimensions, as suggested by Green et al. (1991), by Lee and Ashforth (1996) and by Shirom (1989). Lee and Ashforth (1996), in particular, in their meta-analysis, presented evidence that the first two dimensions are much more correlated with each other than with lack of personal accomplishment, and other variables significant for burnout syndrome have weaker correlations with this third dimension.

Antecedents of burnout can be divided, in the JD-R model perspective (Demerouti et al., 2001), into job demands and job resources. Demands are any physical, social and organizational characteristics that require effort in order to perform the work. Long-term prolonged or repeated exposure to these demands can drain workers' energy and lead to a feeling of exhaustion (Demerouti et al., 2001). Typical job demands are workload, time pressure and emotional demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Karasek et al., 1998). In the specific context of libraries, the workload can be represented by the number of book loans, registrations, cataloguing processes that have to be done daily. The strain caused by workload can be increased by time pressure; this refers to the need to work very quickly throughout the day or at certain times, e.g. to meet a deadline. The strain is particularly great because employees feel a constant urgency and also because it makes it difficult to take a break to restore their energy. Librarians can experience time pressure when several patrons are waiting for a loan and are impatient; this happens especially in the busiest libraries and at certain times of the day (e.g. in the afternoon when many students go to the library after school). Emotional demands regard the need to manage emotions at work while facing supervisors, co-workers and, particularly, users. Front-office employees and service workers have to deal constantly with customers who express their needs and emotions, and who might not always be pleasant. Employees, on the other hand, have to be professional, show positive emotions and kindness; this can sometimes be very exacting. As previously indicated, library users can sometimes be very pressing, they may have unusual needs or requests that are difficult to meet, they can sometimes be very rude and, moreover, some of them might be homeless, drunk or mentally ill.

As well as job characteristics and the specific organizational context, workers may also find it difficult to meet demands and have a feeling of exhaustion owing to their personal and family conditions (Bakker et al., 2014). Much attention has been paid in recent years, for example, to the topic of the ageing workforce; older workers may perceive low 'work ability' (the physical and intellectual resources on which workers rely to meet the demands posed by their work; Converso et al., 2015; Czaja et al., 2001; Ilmarinen, 2001), and therefore have less motivation to work. Mature workers may also experience greater emotional exhaustion and progressively more cynicism (Viotti et al., 2017). The 'graying' of librarianship was underlined in the late '90s in the USA (Gwen, 1998), and represents a more recent phenomenon in Europe; in Italy, particularly, service workers are ageing due to socio-demographical changes and new pension reforms, and the mean age of workers is often over 50 across the public sector (schools, hospitals, government offices, libraries, etc.).

In the model developed by Demerouti et al. (2001), the effect of job demands can be balanced by resources, which have also the effect of enhancing motivation and satisfaction by maintaining healthy conditions for workers. Resources are physical, psychological, social, organizational aspects that help workers to achieve their goal and reduce the impact of demands. They help maintain and restore workers' energy, by reducing the risks of exhaustion and cynicism.

Among the important and largely analysed resources, the possibility of exerting some control over their job (Karasek et al., 1998) is a protective factor for workers; it can be represented by the autonomy and decision latitude about how their activities are managed and developed, as well as by the clarity of what they have to do. Experiencing work as meaningful is a further resource and an important source of motivation.

One of the most explored resources for balancing job demands is social support. This psychosocial dimension has, for example, an important role in modifying the impact of job demands on stress and cardiovascular disease (Johnson and Hall, 1988), in buffering the impact of perceived inequality at work (Loera et al., 2013) and of aggressive and violent workplace relationships (Guglielmetti et al., 2014; Van Emmerik et al., 2007; Viotti et al., 2015).

### *Social support in the workplace*

Social support can be defined as 'the mesh of social relationships and transactions whose function is to complete the personal resources to allow adaptive coping in situations of need' (Alber-Marín Marin and García-Ramírez, 2005: 97 in Snyder, 2009: 377). The reflection on the role played by social support in reducing the negative effects (in terms of exhaustion) of job demands or 'boosting'

(Bakker et al., 2007) the positive effects (in terms of well-being) of existing resources has a long history; it started in the 1970s (Caplan, 1974; House et al., 1988) and is still an area of inquiry (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016; Loera et al., 2016).

Social support is not a univocal construct. As already clearly stated by Cohen and Wills (1985), there are different kinds of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, behavioural, through feedback, and through attachment/integration (Zimmermann et al., 2011). Support can be expressed in fact through emotive presence or comfort in difficult situations (emotional). It can be provided by offering the necessary resources (instrumental) or through active help (behavioural) or, also, by providing information (informational) to perform a task. It can take the form of feedback to adjust performance or, if positive, to enhance self-confidence (through feedback). Social support can also be an expression of belonging to a group or a form of recognition (through attachment/integration) that answers everyone's social need for sociality.

Social support, then, can assume several shades, based on the source that provides it. Among the most studied kinds of sources, peers or co-workers, supervisors and family are the most cited.

Family support has been widely analysed, in particular, in the literature about work-family relationships (e.g. King et al., 1995). In their family contexts, workers can receive affection and support from their partners, but also from their children. Usually considered as needing care and, thus, as a source of familial demand, the relationship with children can offer satisfaction, joy, renewed stimulus and, in general, positive emotions, that can enhance resources and well-being at work (Enrichment theory: Carlson et al., 2006; Ghislieri et al., 2011).

The support provided by co-workers, on one side, and supervisors, on the other, is one of the most studied psychosocial resources in the workplace for reducing the impact of demands on workers (Demerouti et al., 2001; Leiter and Maslach, 1988). Charoensukmongkol et al. (2016) highlight different roles of these two sources of support on the three dimensions of burnout; in particular, co-worker support has an impact on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while supervisor support affects all aspects of burnout.

### *Customers and users: Demanding or supportive?*

Social relationships in the workplace are not only considered as sources of support, but they may also represent demands that can lead to burnout syndrome; this is the case when workers have to deal with abusive supervisors or unpleasant colleagues on a daily basis (Leiter and Maslach, 1988), or experience workplace bullying (even in libraries: Bartlett, 2017). Supervisors and colleagues,

indeed, can contribute to enhance burnout not only because they are not supportive, but also because they maintain negative behaviours. Leaving aside psychodynamic literature about the dark side of leadership (Conger, 1990) and toxic leadership (Frost and Robinson, 1999), several counterproductive supervisors' behaviours can be cited to exemplify how they can be demanding and enhance job burnout; for example, they are not able to manage people or impose contrasting demanding, constant time pressures (Sharma and Cooper, 2016). In addition, co-workers can be considered more demanding than supporting: for example they can be competitive (increasing emotive tension at work), 'selfish' (for example asking for leave in periods of intense work, leaving others to manage the bulk of labour), gossips (reducing confidence and enhancing uncertainty).

However, it is the customer-employer relationship that is widely considered to be the most onerous, the core demands that induce emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in customer and care services. The non-reciprocal relationship with users, clients, customers, patients, etc. is in fact very demanding; professionals offer continuous care or services to users, and these services are often cognitively and emotionally burdening while users often do not show gratitude for the care received, make ambiguous requests or behave aggressively (Dorman and Zapf, 2004) and, in line with reciprocity theories (Buunk and Schaufeli, 1999), these situations may cause burnout among operators. Today's library workers, as previously highlighted, have to deal with all kinds of patrons and users every day, ranging from bookworms to the homeless, and aggressive behaviour is a well-documented matter (Blessinger and Hrycaj, 2013; Kean and McKoy-Johnson, 2009).

All these kinds of behaviour, as explained clearly by Dormann and Zapf (2004), drain workers' resources (self-esteem, optimism, degree of goal attainment), and exacerbate the effect of excessive demands on workers. However, on several occasions, service operators have declared that the relationship with users is an important resource that gives more meaning to their work and strengthens their motivation; users can also be a source of gratitude and reward, an important kind of social support (Loera et al., 2016; Martini et al., 2015).

Curiously though, the social relationship with users is rarely considered as a possible source of support; exceptions are Zimmermann et al. (2011) who analysed customer support in a retail context, Converso et al. (2015) who considered patients' support to nurses, and Loera et al. (2016) who studied clients' support to kindergarten teachers. Zimmermann et al. (2011), who proposed the 'customer-initiated support scale' clearly defined the different kinds of support that users can offer to employees. Customers can sustain employees behaviourally by adapting their actions to the work process or informationally, offering information that can make it easier for them to provide their services. They can also give employees emotional support, by

expressing appreciation for the employees' work and becoming attached to them, or communicating positive feedback. These customers' behaviours become instrumental, motivational and emotional resources that can balance operators' job demands; they can mitigate the fatigue of daily commitment and give back meaning to a job that is both cultural and social. Moreover, they feed a virtuous circle of social exchanges (Foa and Foa, 1980; Zimmermann et al., 2011); operators who receive users' support will be in a better mood and will offer a better service to users, who will pay back positive feedback and behaviours. And so on.

Summing up, users' positive behaviour can have a buffering effect on job demands, by reducing exhaustion and cynicism. For these reasons, the protective role of good interactions with users should be considered jointly with the more studied sources of social support, e.g. the support provided by co-workers and supervisors. Moreover, this is particularly relevant for all professionals who spend much of their time interacting with users rather than with co-workers or supervisors (Dormann and Zapf, 2001), as is the case of teachers (Loera et al., 2016), nurses (Converso et al., 2015) or librarians. Librarians, moreover, work in a public service context devoted to providing free access to culture to anyone, not just scholars; this is a resource per se of the librarian's job (meaning of work, as stated before) that can be enhanced and strengthened by positive relationships with patrons.

## Aims

The aim of the study was to measure burnout levels experienced by a sample of Italian public librarians who interact directly with patrons, and to understand which antecedents (personal attributes, job and organizational characteristics) play a role in the perception of emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Alongside the more traditional resources and demands considered by scholars as antecedents of burnout, we examined the specific role of relationships with users, exploring their negative and positive aspects. The main hypothesis was that users would be both a source of demand, enhancing the risk of burnout, and a source of support, providing protection against psychological exhaustion and cynicism.

## Method

### Procedure

The research was conducted in 18 public libraries in a city situated in Northern Italy, using a self-report questionnaire (pencil and paper). All the 18 libraries of the city, where about 280 people work, participated in the research. Libraries are located in different areas, some in the city centre and some in the suburbs. The staffing of the libraries vary, from around 50 people, where each worker has a

specific role, to three to four people, where roles are less differentiated. Some libraries allow open shelf access for patrons: others provide resources in response to users' requests only. The questionnaires were administered during working hours, between January and March 2016. Each librarian was involved in the administration and the participants filled out the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously.

### Participants

The data collection procedure led to 167 valid participants representing 50.6% of the workers included in the study. Of the sample 83% reported 'always' or 'often' working with users during their workday. Almost all of them had a permanent employment contract (96.9%) and a full-time job (90.1%), and the average number of years in their current job was 25.6 (SD=10.6); 73.2% of the sample were women. The mean age was 53 years (SD=6.4), with ages ranging from 31 to 67 years; 40% of the participants had a secondary school diploma, 26.9% had a junior high school diploma, 18.8% held a Master's degree, 7.5% had a vocational school diploma, 3.1% had a postgraduate specialization or PhD and 1.3% held a Bachelor's degree. Most of them had a partner; 60.1% were married or living with their partner (21.5% were unmarried, 15.8% were separated/divorced, and 2.5% were widowed). In the sample, 65.4% had at least one child, 48% had one child, 34.3% had two children and 14.7% had three.

### Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of a socio-demographic section and the following scales.

Job and organizational dimensions that characterise the everyday work of librarians, and can influence their well-being, were measured using the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Kristensen et al., 2005). In the full version, the COPSOQ measures psychosocial factors of the work environment by using 141 items on a 5-point Likert answer scale, ranging from 1 = 'Always' to 5 = 'Never hardly/ever' and from 1 = 'To a very large extent' to 5 = 'To a very small extent' depending on the item. In order to reduce participants' cognitive burden, we decided to consider only some relevant subscales of the questionnaire that referred to: Workload, defined as the combination of Quantitative demands and Work pace (3 items, e.g. 'Do you have enough time for your work tasks?'); Decision latitude (3 items, e.g. 'Do you have a large degree of control over your work?'); Emotional demands (2 items, e.g. 'Does your work put you in emotionally disturbing situations?'), Predictability (2 items, e.g. 'Do you receive all the information you need in order to do your work well?'), Role clarity (e.g. 'Does your work have clear objectives?')

and Work meaning (2 items, e.g. 'Do you feel that the work you do is important?').

Support from co-workers and from supervisors was evaluated through the two dedicated subscales of the Indicator Tool (Toderi et al., 2013) measuring peer support and managerial support; each one had four items, ranging from 0 = 'Never' to 5 = 'Always', referring to the support from peers and colleagues and the support from supervisors (e.g. 'I get the help I need from my colleagues' and 'My line manager encourages me at work').

The relationship with users was examined from two perspectives. The negative side of the relationship was measured using the Disproportionate customer expectations dimension of the Customer-related social stressors scale (CSS: Dorman and Zapf, 2004), and the positive side by the User-initiated support scale (UISS: Loera et al., 2016). The disproportionate customer expectations dimension examined the stressful aspects of worker-customer relationships, through 10 statements about customers' behaviour (from 1 = 'Not all that true' to 5 = 'Absolutely true'). An example of such statements is 'Some customers always demand special treatment'. The UISS scale evaluated the positive relationships between workers and users by means of four Likert-type agreement items (e.g. 'The users explicitly appreciated my work effort'); each item measured users' support in terms of behavioural, emotional, informational and feedback support.

In line with the work by Demerouti et al. (2001), as regards health outcomes, burnout was measured considering the two core dimensions of the syndrome; the Emotional exhaustion (EE, five items) and Cynicism (CYN, five items) subscales, from the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Schaufeli et al., 1996). In this version of the scale, exhaustion is not referred to in relation to patients or clients but expressed in a general way (e.g. 'I feel emotionally drained by my work'). By Cynicism we mean a feeling of detachment and an increase in negative attitudes towards work, which were measured through items like 'I feel burned out from my work' (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

### Data analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS software, version 24. Scale reliability, which expresses the stability of measurement and the internal consistency of the items that compose a scale, was assessed by calculating Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for each scale included in the questionnaire. Descriptive analysis was then carried out to evaluate the mean and standard deviations of each individual's scores on each scale.

To test the research hypothesis, we used correlation analysis among scores and Multiple Regression Models. In detail, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed by specifying two statistical models in which the two

dimensions of burnout were the dependent variables, i.e. Emotional exhaustion and Cynicism, and the other scores were inserted as predictors, in order to identify the determinants of participants' health and well-being at work. A hierarchical regression process consists in adding predictor variables in steps following their theoretical status; in the first step we added demographic control variables (Gender, Age, Civil status, Presence of children and Education level); the second step consisted of work demands and resources arising from the work environment (Workload, Emotional demands, Decision latitude, Predictability, Role clarity and Work Meaning); in the third step, we added support from co-workers and supervisors and in the last (fourth) one we explored the relationship with users, in negative (CSS) and positive (UISS) terms. This model estimation sequence enabled us to preserve only the most powerful predictors at each step, i.e. to determine whether, after controlling for demographics, work demands and environment, and for the traditional sources of support, the relationship with users was still meaningful enough to affect EE and CYN. At each step, the marginal utility of the most recently added variables was assessed based on the increase in a holistic fit index useful for evaluating the model's solution quality, i.e. the  $R^2$  coefficient (the proportion of variance of the dependent variable explained by the predictors). More analytically, the statistical significance of the estimated effect for each predictor was evaluated by performing a T-test, preserving only the predictors for which there was a 95% probability that the effect would not be equal to zero.

### Results

Table 1 shows the results of the univariate correlation analysis between variables, followed by the means, standard deviations and Cronbach's alphas. Scores for COPSQ variables were between 3.00 (Emotional demands) and 3.67 (Work Meaning), which means workers do not perceive their job as heavily emotional demanding, but they consider it as meaningful. Among the support variables, UISS showed the highest mean (3.74), i.e. users' support scored higher than the other social support sources (co-workers' – M 3.57 – and supervisors' – M 3.38). According to the MBI-GS user manual (Maslach et al., 2006), the means of EE (2.05) and of CYN (1.47) were on an average level.

The scales and subscales had adequate internal coherence. As shown in Table 1, in this sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for predictors ranged from 0.59 (Decision latitude and Emotional demands) to 0.92 (UISS). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was also appreciable for both dimensions of burnout (EE and CYN).

The strongest negative correlations were reported between UISS and CYN and between Work Meaning and CYN; the more individuals feel supported by users and are

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1 Gender (1=M)	—																		
2 Age	-.066	—																	
3 Single	.187*	-.247*	—																
4 Married	-.104	.082	-.581**	—															
5 Low education	-.098	.236*	.035	-.056	—														
6 Medium Education	.049	-.012	-.014	-.030	-.547**	—													
7 Children (1=Yes)	-.088	.207*	-.470**	.312**	.202*	-.071	—												
8 Workload	.005	-.072	-.126	.223*	-.263**	.119	-.002	—											
9 Emotional demands	-.070	-.061	-.065	-.008	-.083	.077	-.134	.317**	—										
10 Decision latitude	.113	-.002	-.131	.108	-.087	-.076	.060	.007	-.228*	—									
11 Predictability	.015	.071	-.047	-.088	.122	-.022	-.005	-.322**	-.189*	.193*	—								
12 Role clarity	.002	-.027	.032	-.096	.146	-.072	-.055	-.232*	-.181*	.196*	.652**	—							
13 Work meaning	.065	-.071	-.038	-.066	-.041	-.083	.103	.101	-.092	.429**	.362**	.453**	—						
14 Support from co-workers	-.043	.018	-.132	.019	.072	-.136	.127	-.193*	-.318**	.193*	.503**	.262**	.262**	—					
15 Support from supervisors	-.033	.090	-.128	.063	.160	-.122	.093	-.216*	-.188*	.181*	.623**	.472**	.239*	.675**	—				
16 UISS	.079	.050	-.120	.091	-.064	-.017	.108	-.150	-.282**	.373**	.321**	.260*	.374**	.339**	.365**	—			
17 CSS	.042	-.144	.090	-.022	-.196*	.121	-.155	.266*	.306**	-.222*	-.276**	-.191*	-.269*	-.277**	-.319**	-.332**	—		
18 EE	-.125	.111	-.002	.023	-.007	.074	-.121	.318**	.380**	-.411**	-.366**	-.299**	-.398**	-.348**	-.328**	-.463**	-.455**	—	
19 CYN	-.128	-.085	.028	-.010	-.020	.003	-.133	.098	.257*	-.518**	-.405**	-.363**	-.528**	-.415**	-.401**	-.534**	.389**	.661**	—
Mean								3.28	3.00	3.39	3.34	3.33	3.67	3.57	3.38	3.74	2.73	2.05	1.47
Standard Deviation								.96	.90	.78	1.09	.88	.90	.92	1.05	.72	.75	1.55	1.42
Alpha								.79	.59	.59	.82	.72	.90	.91	.86	.92	.89	.89	.79

\*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01.



**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression fit: overall and changes in R<sup>2</sup>.

EE					CYN				
Step	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	St. Error	Δ R <sup>2</sup>	Step	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	St. Error	Δ R <sup>2</sup>
1	.109	.047	1.463	.109	1	.056	-.012	1.337	.056
2	.452	.377	1.182	.344**	2	.559	.496	.943	.503**
3	.463	.377	1.183	.011	3	.574	.503	.937	.015
4	.545	.460	1.102	.082**	4	.643	.574	.867	.069**

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01.

engaged in important work, the less cynical they become. The UISS also revealed a significant negative correlation with EE, i.e. workers who perceive a higher support from users are less emotionally exhausted. None of the demographic variables were found to have significant correlations with burnout dimensions.

Table 2 and Table 3 report the results of the Multiple Regression Analysis. At Step 1, when only the demographic variables were included, the Presence of children was significant for both EE and CYN and exerted a negative effect (i.e. had a protective role); vice versa the effect of Age was significant and positive only for EE (the older the participants the higher their EE score). Only Having children and Age were significant; Gender, Marital status and Education had no effect on being cynical or exhausted. At Step 2, after adding the work and organizational variables of the COPSOQ, the change in R<sup>2</sup> was significant, for both EE and CYN. At this step, only Workload showed a positive significant effect on EE, while Decision latitude and Work meaning negatively influenced CYN; i.e. the higher is Workload, the higher is EE. Vice versa, the higher are Decision latitude and Meaning of work, the lesser is CYN. At Step 3, the inclusion of work support variables, i.e. Support from co-workers and Support from supervisors, did not produce a significant change in R<sup>2</sup> in EE or CYN and neither variable had an effect. At Step 4, with the addition of UISS and CSS, a significant change was reported in R<sup>2</sup> for EE and CYN; both variables included in this last step showed significant effects on the dependent variables. In particular, UISS – users' support – exerted a negative effect on the levels of EE and CYN (decreasing them), while CSS – disproportionate expectation of users – increased them.

## Discussion and conclusion

The present work examined the experience of burnout among 167 librarians in Northern Italy and, referring to the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), identified the demands and resources that had a significant impact on the two core burnout dimensions of EE and CYN. Specifically, in addition to some established sources of demands and resources, we analysed the impact of both negative and positive aspects of relationships with users on burnout

**Table 3.** Regression parameters: standardized coefficients.

Step	Predictors	EE	CYN
1	Gender (I=M)	-.023	-.022
	Single (I=Yes)	-.147	-.079
	Partner (I=Yes)	-.006	.057
	Low education (I=Yes)	-.019	-.002
	Medium education (I=Yes)	.030	-.104
	Age	.252**	.062
2	Children (I=Yes)	-.178*	-.187**
	Decision latitude	-.152	-.316**
	Emotional demands	.087	.056
	Workload	.247**	.037
	Predictability	-.112	-.167
	Role clarity	.130	.089
3	Work meaning	-.146	-.237**
	Support from co-workers	-.034	-.065
4	Support from supervisors	-.006	-.020
	UISS	-.205**	-.203**
	CSS	.226**	.189**

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01.

among workers. Demanding relationships with customers is, indeed, one of the most studied causes of exhaustion experienced by social operators (Dorman and Zapf, 2004; Guglielmetti et al., 2014). In the specific context of libraries, patrons can be very aggressive, exacting, impatient when they are looking for books (Blessinger and Hrycaj, 2013; Kean and McKoy-Johnson, 2009), while a 'new' group of library frequenters can show inadequate and unexpected kinds of behaviour (being drunk, dirty, speaking loudly, etc.) and relationships with them can be really difficult to manage (Albrecht, 2012; Farrugia, 2002).

Nonetheless, users can also be an important source of support, an issue that has been largely neglected in the literature (Loera et al., 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2011), especially where workers interact more with users than with supervisors or co-workers. As users can express gratitude (Martini et al., 2015) or give feedback or key information that helps the employee to fulfil the service (Zimmermann et al., 2011), their support is able to buffer operators' exhaustion and enhance their well-being (Converso et al., 2015). Moreover, if users are supportive,

operators can offer better services; users are probably more satisfied and therefore more grateful and positive towards operators, in a sort of virtuous circle process (McCullough, 2002; McCullough et al., 2001; Martini et al., 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2011).

The importance of the relationship with users, in terms of both the negative and positive aspects, was confirmed in our analysis. The librarians who completed the questionnaire reported levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that, while not worrying, were not particularly low either: it reinforces the findings of several previous research studies that reported how working in public libraries is a stressful and demanding profession.

The hierarchical regression analysis showed exhaustion, the core dimension of burnout, to be increased by both personal and working conditions. Ageing worsens the perception of not having sufficient resources, in line with previous studies on the ageing workforce (Viotti et al., 2017), while in contrast, having children is a factor of protection against exhaustion and cynicism, in line with the work-family enrichment theory (Carlson et al., 2006).

In the work of librarians, focused on offering all citizens the possibility of having free access to culture, cynicism, which is the progressive disengagement and detachment from work, is thus reduced by perceiving the work performed as meaningful and by the level of autonomy in doing the job.

The relationship with patrons has a key impact on burnout dimensions. Disproportionate expectations from users enhance both emotional exhaustion and cynicism in line with our expectation and with the previous literature, developed in the Retail (Zimmermann et al., 2011), Health (Converso et al., 2015), and Educational (Loera et al., 2016) contexts.

Users also offer support, though, which has a highly protective effect against the risks of exhaustion and cynicism. Social support within the organization, indeed, cited by most studies focused on socio-relational resources (Van Emmerik et al., 2007), did not buffer any burnout dimension in our sample.

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation concerns the sample size, since it included just 167 participants and all within a specific geographic area, which does not allow us to consider the results as representative of the population. Further studies should analyse the perception of burnout and how this is linked to the relationship with users in a wider sample. Another methodological limitation regards the research design; since this is a cross-sectional study, we cannot say much about the effect of users' support on workers' health in the long term and, more importantly, we cannot verify the causality among these variables. Moreover, despite the fact that COPSOQ is a widely validated used tool, its short version is composed of subscales of two or three items only, that might have a weak reliability, as occurred for the Decision

latitude and Emotional demands measures in this study. Finally, this study showed the positive effect of users' support on reducing emotional exhaustion and cynicism; future studies should take account other outcomes in order to show whether and how users' support may also increase workers' well-being.

In spite of these limitations, the paper provides further insights into the antecedents of exhaustion and cynicism among workers in libraries, antecedents that have rarely been explored (Lindén et al., 2016) despite an emerging awareness of the risk of burnout among this population. Several research studies examine if librarians perceive burnout, but few studies try to identify antecedents of this syndrome (Lindén et al., 2016). On the other hand, stressful effect of 'disruptive' users (Hartley, 2015) have been widely taken into account previously, but rarely alongside other job and relational dimensions. The present work is valuable because it analyses demands and resources that may affect emotional librarians' exhaustion and cynicism, considering both 'classical' job characteristics and relational dimensions with supervisors, co-workers and, specifically, users. Moreover, the study considers both the negative and positive aspects of the relationship with users, which have seldom been explored together; in particular, only a few works (Loera et al., 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2011) have considered users as a source of support, and none, to the best of our knowledge, in the library context.

This specific focus on the two aspects of the relationship with users can have useful practical implications for library managers. Firstly, as users' difficult behaviour can increase workers' exhaustion and cynicism, solutions capable of controlling users' behaviour and its impact on workers should be developed and implemented as a priority. Secondly, as users can offer essential support to librarians who spend lots of time with the public, the positive effect of this source of support could be enhanced. In particular, the virtuous circle of users' satisfaction and support for workers could be strengthened; if working conditions allow librarians to offer users good services, they will show more gratitude and support towards librarians who will provide a better service. And so on.

Finally, as underlined elsewhere (Johansson, 2004) libraries can have new roles when, for example, government policy involving the use of self-administered procedures (like state school enrolment in Italy, or unemployment benefits in the UK<sup>1</sup>) requires fundamental IT and software knowledge and the availability of basic hardware that a large sector of the population do not have. Libraries may act as 'democratic intermediaries' and places of acculturation and integration for people who are not the library's usual clientele (older patrons, immigrants, etc.) and who may represent a part of the new audience of the changing era 'from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg' (Einasto, 2015). Library service workers could then be trained not only in

defensive measures for dealing with unpleasant users, but also to be proactive in interpreting this new key role by enhancing the positive and motivating side of the relationship with older and newer patrons/users.

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### Note

1. The drama film by Ken Loach 'I, Daniel Blake' (2016) clearly describes this situation.

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