

## **WHEN YOU'RE AT THE FRONTLINE: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE LIBRARY CIRCULATION STAFF IN THEIR WORK AREA**

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### **Abstract**

This study attempted to make sense in highlighting the experiences of the library circulation staff in their work area. As analytical lens, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology which is an approach to understanding social interaction and is based on the assumption that social reality is the result of our agreement to agree with one another was employed. In making sense of the conversation with the library circulation section staff, general inductive approach formulated by Thomas (2006) was used. Making sense of the experiences of the library circulation staff in their work area, these themes emerged: constructs of a library, thoughts and practices in the workplace, relationships established in the workplace, and the implication of space in the workplace. These themes point back to the services offered and tasks performed by the staff. The experiences of the staff working at the circulation section define their notions of the organization where they belong.

Keywords: Frontline, Experiences, Library Circulation Staff, Work Area, Themes, Notions

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

People are individuals each with unique attributes. Work may reflect ones character while performing his or her duties. It is interesting to note that in the workplace each one brings his or her own identity, values and attitudes. In return, experiences in the workplace were created and recreated.

Human behavior per se is salient in an organization. The individual experiences various dynamics as he or she performs the required role expected of them. This stirs the dynamics of communication between and among the rank and file. This also may hold true in the performance of duties to the clientele – the students, the faculty, among others. An organization emerges in

communication, which thus furnishes not only the *site* of its appearance to its members, but also the surface on which members read the meaning of the organization to them (Taylor, 2009).

This study looked at the meaning of the organization to its employees and also the relationships that would transpire particularly among UPLB library circulation staff. The experiences of the library circulation staff in their work area may define the way they perceive the organization where they belong.

The library is said to be the heart of an institution. It is a storage of knowledge and information where everyone can gather and avail of it. The circulation section of the library is manned by a unit head, an assistant, and 10 support staff. Ten of the 12 personnel were men. Most of the staff had been serving the library for the past 30-35 years while the rest for 3-4 years. The staff of the circulation section also supervises the reserve section. Other than the reserve section, the staff is assigned to supervise the counter, bookshelves, and the control. It is in the counter where books are being lent, renewed and returned; fines are also being paid in this area as well as the renewal of IDs. The staff were also assigned at the shelves to monitor the sequence of books or whether it is properly placed based on the call number. At the control, the staff monitor the people going in and out of the section. This is where bags are inspected and wearing of IDs are monitored. Each staff is assigned an hour per area to supervise on rotation basis. The staff were bounded with the mandate to perform their duties and responsibilities and that ethical behavior and standards should be followed and maintained at all times.

Knowing the operation of the reference section, there is still a need to unearth the experiences of the circulation staff to understand their nuances which could possibly help in improving the services offered by the university library.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

The primary goal of this study is to unearth the experiences of the university library circulation staff in their work area, to make sense of those experiences, and to identify the emerging themes from conversations with the library circulation staff.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of the university library circulation section staff in the performance of their duties?
2. What are the themes that emerge from the UPLB Library circulation section staff's experiences?

### **1.2 Theoretical and Analytical Framework**

As to the analytical lens, ethnomethodology was used. This is an approach to understanding social interaction and is based on the assumption that social reality is the result of our agreement to agree with one another. Developed by Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodology is influenced by phenomenology, linguistics, anthropology, symbolic interactionism, and other mainstream concepts found in sociology. Ethnomethodology, given its Greek roots literally means the methods of ordinary people that are used on a daily basis to accomplish their everyday needs. Wallace and Wolf (n.d.) stated, "If we translate the "ethno" part of the term as "member" or "folk" or "people" then

ethnomethodology can be defined as members' methods of making sense of their social world. Ethnomethodology interest is in how people make sense of everyday activities.

In *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) he wrote that his work had been particularly influenced by Talcott Parsons, Alfred Schutz, Aron Gurwitsch, and Edmund Husserl. Garfinkel's work was more inclined at having detailed descriptions. Members of society make sense of and function in society by creating social facts or understandings of how society works (Garfinkel 1967).

In the context of this study, the circulation section of the university library is seen as a place composed of individuals who are creating their realities from their own perspective. Through the various interactions that had transpired between or among the participants and with their clientele those realities can be known.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The methodological tradition of this study was anchored on the phenomenological tradition which generally assumes that people actively interpret their experiences and come to understand the world by personal experience with it. This tradition concentrates on conscious experience of the person. Phenomenology, then, makes actual lived experience the basic data of reality. All you know is what you experience: Phenomenology means letting things become manifest as what they are. For Deetz (1973), phenomenology can be summarized into three basic principles: knowledge is conscious, how one relates to a thing determines its meaning for that person, and language is the vehicle for meaning. Applied in this study, the realities emerging from the experiences accounted for by the staff of the university library circulation section were highlighted.

### **2.2 Research Participants**

The research participants of this study were 12 informally interviewed university library circulation staff who were present during Summer 2014.

### **2.3 Research Instruments**

Based on the research questions, guide questions were formulated. It consists of open-ended and structured and semi-structured questions which aimed at probing on the experiences of the research participants in their work area and in unearthing emerging themes pertaining those experiences.

### **2.4 Procedures in Gathering Information**

The information elicited from researched participants were mainly gathered through informal interviews. Key informant interviews with the circulation section head and the chief

librarian were also conducted. Observations before, during, and after the series of interviews were also done. Data corpus were carefully transcribed.

The library staff at the circulation section knew that they will be interviewed since a permission letter duly approved by the university librarian was required. All the interviews were done using a digital recorder. Probing was also done in order to unearth other information which could be useful for the research study. The interviews were done for two days. All recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts proved to have contained rich details that would give substantial weight to the research.

## 2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

In making sense of my conversation with the library circulation section staff, I employed the general inductive approach Thomas (2006). The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant, significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. The outcome of an inductive analysis is the development of categories into a model or framework that summarizes the raw data and conveys key themes and processes. The categories resulting from the coding which are the core of inductive analysis potentially have five key features:

1. Category label: a word or phrase used to refer to the category. The label often carries inherent meanings that may or may not reflect the specific features of the category.
2. Category description: a description of the meaning of the category including key characteristics, scope and limitations.
3. Text or data associated with the category: examples of text coded into category that illustrate meanings, associations and perspectives associated with the category.
4. Links: Each category may have links or relationships with other categories. In a hierarchical category system (e.g. free diagram), these links may indicate superordinate, parallel and subordinate categories (e.g. “parent”, “sibling” or “child” relationships). Links are likely to be based on commonalities in meanings between categories or assumed causal relationships
5. The type of model in which category is embedded: The category system may be subsequently incorporated in a model, theory or framework.

Inductive coding begins with close readings of text and consideration of multiple meanings that are inherent in the text. The evaluator then identifies text segments that contain meaningful units and creates a label for a new category to which the text segments is assigned. The category may also be linked to other categories in various relationships, such a network, a hierarchy of categories, or a causal sequence. The following procedures are used for the inductive analysis of qualitative data:

1. Preparation of raw data files (data cleaning): Format the raw files in a common format.
2. Close reading of text: Once text has been prepared, the raw text is read in detail until the evaluator is familiar with its content and gains an understanding of the themes and events covered in the text.

3. Creation of categories: The evaluator identifies and defines categories or themes.
4. Overlapping coding and uncoded text: Among the commonly assumed rules that underlie qualitative coding: a) one segment of text may be coded into more than one category, and b) a considerable amount of text may not be assigned to any category.
5. Continuing revision and refinement of category system: Within each category, search for subtopics, including contradictory points of view and new insights.

To increase the plausibility of interpretation for this study, consultation with qualitative communication research professors and graduate students were sought. An audit trail based on the interview transcripts containing the conversations with the participants was also done.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section put together the findings that tackled the research questions. Various constructs have emerged from the conversations with the university library circulation section staff. These surfaced from the accounts of their experiences in their work area.

#### *Thoughts and Practices in the Workplace*

The library is considered to be an essential part of any educational institution. It stores holdings of books and other supplementary materials for academic and other related purposes. This holds true to the accounts of the participants on their notions of a library. One theme considers the library as the heart of an institution.

From the accounts of the experiences of the circulation section staff, themes on their thoughts towards working in the library emerged. They experience joy being a circulation staff of the library. At times, however, boredom is felt in a particular area of the circulation section.

As a workplace, the library can also be challenging depending on the extent and type of work that is assigned to a particular staff to perform. Another theme that emerged is about boredom. One exemplar depicted a participant's feeling for having served the library for 30 years. It is interesting to note that while the staff is expressing his boredom in the workplace, he still manages to multitask while the interview is going on. My interview did not hamper him from entertaining the queries of the students.

Frontliners – this is how the library staff described themselves. This means that they have to deal with the students, faculty, staff, and others who are transacting business at the library. As a result, conflicts may arise as they perform their duties.

It also emerged from the interview transcripts that being transferred to another work area could be unforgettable. This is what one library staff felt when she was transferred from her original work area of 32 years. One participant will never forget the tasks assigned to him in a particular area of the circulation section. Another emerging theme was on slow promotion. Being compensated and get promoted is a big thing especially for the library staff who have been around for almost or more than 30 years in the service.

### ***Relationships Established in the Work Area***

#### ***Relationship with the section head***

All the participants noted that they have an open communication with their section head. They treat her with respect. Whenever there are problems she deals with it to immediately resolve the conflict. The conversations are purely work-related.

#### ***Relationship with co-workers***

Dealing with co-workers takes a good grasp of interpersonal skills. It is interesting to note that at the circulation section majority of the staff are males and only two were females. Like in any other work environment, professionalism is standard that should be followed. The same is true in the library.

#### ***Relationship with the clientele (students/faculty)***

The nature of work in the library provides an avenue for the circulation staff to also build good relationships not only among themselves but also with the students who frequent the library. The relationship may not be that close, however, the staff whose work involves facing hundreds or even thousands of students five days a week and 8 hours a day the satisfaction knowing that they can still be recognized.

Being at the frontline of service, it is a realization among library staff to be at their best attitude at all times within the workplace. One staff emphasized that one of the biggest challenges of performing a job such as theirs was the ability to read people's minds. Though difficult, they still attempt to do so.

### ***Space in the Workplace***

The participants brought up the issue on space in all the areas of the library. This is in order to accommodate a maximum number of students and at the same time providing them with a conducive environment while they study. Likewise, the staff will benefit if the space is not crowded for them to efficiently perform their various duties and responsibilities. This is also supported by almost the same claim of another participant hoping for a more spacious area for the library.

The library deserves to avail of the privilege of maximizing the use of its space in order to accommodate as many students as possible.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

4.1. Thoughts and practices were developed in the work area of the library circulation staff. The library circulation staff considered the library as the heart of an institution. They experienced joy, boredom, challenges, and unforgettable memories. They consider themselves as frontliners and that slow promotion should be given proper action.

4.2. The library circulation staff established relationships in their work area. Open communication centered purely on work-related conversations are prevalent between them and their section head. With their co-workers, interpersonal skills is important. Professionalism is practiced all the time. With the clientele, the staff felt satisfied whenever they are still recognized by old students and alumnus through the years. For them, it is important to be at their best attitude at all times. Likewise, they find it challenging in reading people's minds.

4.3. Notions about space in the workplace emerged from the interview transcripts. Space proved to be salient in the conduct of their duties and responsibilities. Likewise, space can promote a conducive learning area among the students. For them, the library deserves the privilege of having a maximized space to be more efficient.

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