Consultants in Academic Libraries: library literature meets the voices on the ground Marni Harrington (University of Western Ontario); Ania Dymarz (Simon Fraser University)

The pervasive use of consultants in libraries can be understood as one of many indicators that neoliberalism is shaping our workplaces. To what extent, however, do library workers view the practice of hiring consultants as one that significantly impacts their labour and their workplaces? This paper will present the preliminary results of a survey looking at consultant use and report on the perceptions and experiences of academic library workers in Canada. A synthesis of survey results will draw out key themes in the perceptions of various library worker groups looking not just on the practice itself but on the impact of the practice on work and workplace.

The survey results will be presented in parallel with the results of a critical discourse analysis of existing literature to highlight some of the resonance and dissonance between the two lines of analysis. While the discourse analysis reveals the need for developing a more critically informed understanding of the practice in our scholarship, survey results indicate that by and large respondents are not directly critiquing the practice itself. Many respondents, however, demonstrated a keen awareness of the intricacies of the knowledge and power dynamics that play out in consultant interventions. These dynamics were understood by participants to be highly problematic but also at times to be enabling and empowering. Unpacking the varied perceptions of respondents, this research aims to cultivate an understanding of the practice that can be shaped by critical theory while also being informed by the on the ground perspectives of library workers. The framework of critical realism will be used to pull together the results of our discourse analysis with the survey data allowing for an exploration of agency, mechanisms, and structures that will better explain the phenomenon in question.

Reflecting on how the practice of hiring consultants in academic libraries is informed by the workplace norms of our institution, our profession, and the sociopolitical realities of our time, attendees will be encouraged to think critically about how work is defined, enabled, or constrained in the library. Explicitly naming the ways in which our workplaces are defined by normative practices can help us better understand the shape of our work, the effects of these practices on our workplace, and the ways in which we actively perpetuate or resist the dominant values of our times.