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## THE IMPACT OF DIFFICULT INTERPERSONAL SITUATIONS AT WORK ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, STRESS, AND WELL-BEING OF LIBRARIANS – RESEARCH REPORT



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**KEYWORDS:** Difficult interpersonal relationships at work. Communication. Librarians. Stress at work. Pathologies at work. Psychological safety in the library. Well-being

**ABSTRACT:** **Thesis/Purpose of the article** – The aim of this article is to identify difficult interpersonal situations faced by librarians in public libraries in Poland and their impact on their sense of psychological safety, stress, and well-being. The article first outlines the basic concepts and literature related to difficult interpersonal situations in the workplace and people's sense of psychological safety, stress, and well-being. Next, the results of the author's own research conducted among librarians in public libraries are presented. **Research Methods** – Literature analysis and a diagnostic survey were used. **Key Results/Conclusions** – The majority of surveyed librarians (76.3%) reported experiencing difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues at work. Such situations occurred most frequently once a month (24.6%) and occurred primarily in contacts with management (40.0%) and colleagues from their own department (38.1%). Difficult situations with people at work primarily involve interpersonal conflicts and lack of cooperation (33.9%), as well as poor communication (29.7%). Nearly three-quarters of respondents (65.3%) reported being able to cope with difficult situations, most often through active listening and using techniques known from the literature (31.4%). Those who struggle to cope most often seek help from colleagues (36.8%). Difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues cause significant stress for 20% of respondents, while 9% feel threatened, and 8.4% experience mental health problems as a result. The results show that difficult interpersonal situations are common in the library community and vary in nature, with highly individualized coping strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

For at least several decades, significant changes have been evident in the functioning of Polish libraries, particularly public ones. Initially, the role of these institutions as libraries tasked with collecting, processing, storing, preserving, and making library materials available has evolved. Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on serving diverse users and finding ways to attract their attention, integrate them, engage them in cultural activities, and involve them in library activities for the benefit of local communities (see, for example, *Biblioteka w otoczeniu społecznym...*, 2000; *Biblioteka i informacja w aktywizacji regionalnej...*, 2012). Considerable attention is now being paid to prioritizing the needs of current and potential library users. Hence, the work of a librarian, although stereotypically considered uneventful, uninvolved, or boring, has undergone significant change over recent decades. A contemporary librarian can hold a wide variety of positions, including bibliographer, circulation desk employee, IT specialist, network/database administrator, information broker, user information and training specialist, collection

digitization specialist, coaching and mentoring specialist, bibliotherapist, promotion and marketing specialist, bibliometrics specialist, or fundraiser (cf. Jazdon, 2003; Machcińska, 2013; Karwowski, 2018). It's also important to remember that many librarians often perform a wide variety of tasks in a single position. Library staff multitasking, in addition to work consistent with their personality and education, also includes tasks they may not necessarily enjoy. It also involves daily interpersonal contact with both colleagues and library patrons. The multitude and intensity of tasks and interpersonal contacts can lead to overload, excessive stress, and conflict. In the long term, they may significantly reduce the sense of psychological safety of librarians and, consequently, lead to a decrease in work motivation or to professional burnout.

Healthy relationships with colleagues are particularly important in professional life. Therefore, the aim of this article is to identify the difficult interpersonal situations librarians encounter at work and their impact on their sense of psychological safety, stress, and well-being. The discussion begins with a brief review of the literature on difficult interpersonal relationships, psychological safety in the workplace, occupational stress, and well-being. Selected results from our own research conducted among librarians in Polish public libraries will then be presented. The text was prepared using a literature review approach, while the research for library staff was conducted using a diagnostic survey based on an anonymous online questionnaire.

## LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE SUBJECT

The importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace and an efficient communication system cannot be overstated. Interacting with people is a key aspect of a librarian's work, something that is particularly evident in public, school, and academic libraries where numerous readers pass through daily and internal communication processes, i.e., between staff, take place. Interpersonal communication, i.e., communication that takes place "face-to-face", encompasses verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as all aspects related to the psychology of individual differences, such as the influence of personality, temperamental traits, and intelligence on how messages are expressed and received. The goal of interpersonal communication is the desire to understand others and be understood by them, which is a complex process (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2019; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2023). Individual differences, intentions, motivations, stress, and even illnesses can contribute to the generation of errors, distortions, and pathologies in interpersonal relations, especially when people spend many hours, days, or years together in one place and have different

personal and professional experiences, as is the case, for example, with working in a library.

Interpersonal communication in the workplace has a direct impact on relationships between employees and the effectiveness of their tasks. The factors that generate this can be divided into four main groups. The first is the language of communication between the sender and receiver, meaning the way information is transmitted and received. This is influenced by factors such as attitudes, expectations, intentions, the way the message is conveyed such as tone of voice, and aspects related to body language. The second group includes communication channels, meaning knowledge of guidelines related to written and spoken communication, as well as communication mediated by information and communication technologies. The third group of important factors shaping good interpersonal relationships through healthy communication includes providing feedback. Such information allows for a better understanding of the context of the situation and the rapid communication of results, for example, from meetings or projects in which employees are not participating but are required to complete a single task. Feedback is therefore a mechanism that accelerates interaction, supports information exchange and task management, and thus allows time to be saved and allocated to other tasks at work. The final, fourth group of factors influencing communication and interpersonal relationships includes environmental factors, such as noise that distorts the flow of information (Kakirman-Yildiz, 2012). Every act of communication has both a substantive and a relational aspect, which is a reflection of one of the divisions of interpersonal relations into real, i.e. based on facts, and transference, which is related to the incorrect interpretation of the relationship and the projection of unconscious thoughts or ideas onto the interlocutor or coworker (Cyrklaff-Gorczyca, 2019). The effects, but also the causes of improper interpersonal relations between co-workers in the library may be the underestimation or failure to observe the four groups of factors described above (Kakirman-Yildiz, 2012; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca, 2019). This is also influenced by behaviors resulting from relational and personal aspects that favor the development of pathological situations in the workplace, such as gossip, conscious circulation of false information, avoidance of contact, personal problems, illnesses, information overload, employee conflicts, or mobbing (cf. Stankiewicz 2006; Ifidon, Ugwuanyi 2013; Kakirman-Yildiz 2012; Cyrklaff, 2016; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca, 2019; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca, 2023).

The aforementioned difficulties in interpersonal relationships lead to decreased psychological safety, increased stress levels, and decreased well-being among library staff. Psychological safety is the employee's belief that the organization in which they work provides a safe place

to take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, Dillon, & Roloff, 2007). A psychologically safe work environment is, therefore, one in which employees freely express their ideas, provide honest feedback, collaborate, take risks, and experiment. They do all this in an atmosphere of trust and honesty, which helps overcome threats to individual and organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999). Bobbi L. Newman, an American librarian and library trainer, argues that “librarians can struggle with psychological safety because we value the appearance of politeness above all else. We often confuse politeness with kindness. It’s difficult to ensure psychological safety when team members are afraid to express themselves and be themselves, because any kind of nonconformity is perceived as unpleasant” (Newman, 2025). Each library employee has control only over their own work, so the shared responsibility of all those working in different library teams is to create an environment in which it is safe to try new things, fail, and start over. This requires trust, which is a long-term process. Library team leaders can foster this trust through open communication and transparency (Powers & Fife, 2025). Freely expressing thoughts and ideas without fear of ridicule or other unpleasant consequences is an essential element of supporting employee well-being, which in the long run supports their mental and physical health.

In the 21st century, the greatest enemy to health, well-being, and sustainable development may be stress, or the imbalance between the demands placed on a person and their potential to cope with a given situation. It most often occurs when demands are at the limits of an individual’s capabilities or are impossible to meet. These demands can be external, such as professional or internal standards. Both excessive and insufficient demands contribute to this imbalance. The emotions that arise are intense and predominantly negative, stimulating the body to restore balance and equalize its emotional state (Heszen, 2013).

Stress in a library employee can stem from their individual circumstances, life situation, and professional situation. Within the context of individual circumstances, personality and temperamental traits, stress-coping styles, and openness to experience and interpersonal interactions will influence coping with tensions and difficulties (cf. Cyrklaff, 2016; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2019; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2023). The second group includes stressors related to personal life, such as the illness of a loved one, parenting problems, financial problems, or partnerships. When considering stress in the workplace, factors that contribute to it can be divided into internal and external. The first group includes factors generated within the organization, such as systems of employee evaluation, motivation, engagement, and remuneration. External factors, on the other hand, include those stemming from the environment and system in which the library operates. In the case of the library, these will certainly include: a difficult financial situation

that affects working conditions; a decline in readership, which affects the validity of the library's existence; and difficult interpersonal situations with readers and colleagues (Wojciechowska, 2021; see also Cyrklaff, 2016; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2019; Cyrklaff-Gorczyca 2023).

Chronic stress and anxiety exhaust the human body, often leading to immune system disorders and lifestyle diseases. Excessive exposure to these factors in professional life can lead to burnout or mental and physical illnesses, and therefore to a decline in well-being. According to Janusz Czapiński, mental well-being is an attitude toward one's life that promotes active coping with adversity and striving to achieve values important to the individual. It is a subjectively positive experience, consisting of a positive assessment of one's life quality and prospects at the cognitive level and a predominance of pleasant experiences at the emotional level (Czapiński, 2009). According to Martin Seligman's theory, well-being consists of five elements measurable using self-report scales or objective indicators: positive emotions, engagement, relationships with others, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and achievements (Seligman, 2012). This demonstrates the importance of relationships with others for human health and well-being. Research has shown that over 75% of American academic librarians have a low sense of psychological safety, which manifests itself in, among other things, high stress and fear of making mistakes at work (Reno, 2022), and consequently, exposure to ridicule or unfair evaluation. The opinions and feelings of librarians from public libraries in Poland are similar. During a series of communication workshops conducted by the author, it emerged that a lack of psychological safety at work increased their stress levels and decreased their well-being. More research is needed on this topic among library workers of all types in Poland. The results of some of these studies are presented below.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to determine what difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues librarians in public libraries in Poland encounter at work and how they cope with them. The study was conducted in conjunction with a planned book for librarians, commissioned by the Polish Librarians Association. The survey was planned to provide an excellent opportunity to explore the real-world communication and interpersonal challenges faced by Polish library employees.

This text was prepared using non-reactive research in the form of a content analysis of the relevant literature. This analysis was used as a basis for a literature review, including books, articles, and industry publications. These publications covered broadly defined interpersonal

relationships at work, employee psychological safety, stress, and well-being in the workplace.

The study of librarians was conducted using a diagnostic survey method. It utilized the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) technique and an anonymous online survey tool. First, a pilot study was conducted in the second quarter of 2021 among eight librarians known to the author. At the suggestion of three respondents, one semi-open-ended question was added to the group of questions about problems in working with colleagues. Ultimately, the questionnaire consisted of a personal profile, a section with questions about interpersonal relationships (with clients and colleagues), a section on burnout, and a section on information overload. This article will only discuss the results regarding interpersonal relationships with colleagues, so the remaining parts of the research tool will not be described here. The personal profile included questions about age, gender, length of service, type of library where respondents worked, number of people employed at that library, and job position. The main section on interpersonal relations contained fourteen questions, of which six were closed, one was semi-open, and the rest were open. Six questions concerned difficult situations at work resulting from interpersonal relationships with clients, seven questions concerned interpersonal problems with co-workers, and one question addressed needs related to interpersonal relationships and psychological aspects of work, which will be worth describing in the planned book. The questions reflected two main groups of issues: the characteristics of difficult interpersonal situations with co-workers and clients, and ways of coping with them. The study revealed that respondents provided many descriptive answers, including references to how these situations affected their sense of psychological safety, stress, and well-being. Therefore, they will also be described in this text. A link to the anonymous questionnaire was posted on the website of the Polish Librarians' Association in August 2021, with a request to all library readers to complete it. It was assumed that librarians would regularly read the news published on this website and participate in the study.

The following specific research questions were addressed:

1. Do librarians experience difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues?
2. If so, how often do they occur?
3. With whom do these situations most often occur?
4. What problems do difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues raise?
5. Are the respondents able to cope with such situations?
6. How do respondents cope with such situations?
7. Who do respondents turn to when they are unable to cope?

8. How do these difficult interpersonal situations with colleagues affect respondents' experiences of stress, psychological safety, and well-being?

In the calculations, categorical data are presented as numbers and percentages.

## CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Despite repeated in-person requests and the survey being sent via the SBP newsletter and email by the study author, 124 respondents had responded by the beginning of 2022. Two questionnaires were rejected due to missing data. 118 questionnaires were completed by staff of pedagogical libraries, three by staff of school libraries, and one by a female staff member of a pedagogical library. A homogeneous group of 118 respondents from both male and female librarians from public libraries was ultimately included in the calculations for the studies analyzed in this article.

The vast majority of the study participants were women (92.4%). Men constituted only 5.9% of the respondents. The age of the respondents was distributed as follows: the largest group were people aged 25–35 (37.3%), then 36–45 (28.8%), 46–55 (16.9%), over 55 (15.3%) and below 25 (1.7%).

In terms of length of service, the majority of respondents had between eleven and fifteen years of professional experience (25.4%) and over thirty years of experience (22.0%).

The largest group of respondents worked in institutions employing up to five people (31.4%) and from six to fifteen people (26.3%).

Among the respondents, the majority held positions related to direct customer service (59.3%), followed by managerial positions (28.8%) and those in the collections and processing department (11.9%).

Detailed characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 118)

Variables	No.	%
<b>1. Gender</b>		
Women	109	92.4
Men	7	5.9
Lack of data	2	1.7
<b>2. Age</b>		
Under 25	2	1.7
25-35	44	37.3
36-45	34	28.8
46-55	20	16.9
Above 55	18	15.3

Variables	No.	%
<b>3. Length of service in years</b>		
Under 5	19	16.1
5-10	18	15.3
11-15	30	25.4
16-20	10	8.5
21-25	10	8.5
26-30	5	4.2
Above 30	26	22.0
<b>4, Number of employees</b>		
Under 5	37	31.4
6-15	31	26.3
16-25	9	7.6
26-50	17	14.4
More than 50	24	20.3
<b>5. Position</b>		
Managerial	34	28.8
Direct customer service	70	59.3
Collections and processing	14	11.9

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Difficult interpersonal situations with co-workers

In the survey, the majority of librarians (N = 90; 76.3%) reported experiencing difficult situations in collaboration with colleagues. Such situations most often occurred once a month (24.6%), while 22.0% of respondents indicated that they never encountered such a problem. Eleven percent of respondents indicated that such situations occurred once every two weeks, once a week, or even several times a week. 4.3% of respondents reported such situations occurring daily. A detailed breakdown of the frequency of difficult situations with colleagues is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of the frequency of difficult situations with co-workers

How often do such difficult situations happen to you?	No.	%
1. Once a month	29	24.6
2. Several times a week	13	11.0
3. Once a week	13	11.0
4. Once every two weeks	13	11.0
5. Once every three months	7	5.9
6. Less than once a year	7	5.9
7. Every day	5	4.3

<b>How often do such difficult situations happen to you?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
8. Once a year	3	2.5
9. Once every six months	2	1.7
10. This never happens two me	26	22.0

Next, respondents were asked who they most often encountered in difficult situations (Table 3). These situations most frequently occurred with management (40.0%) and with colleagues from their own department (38.1%). They also frequently occurred with individuals from other departments (33.0%) and with subordinates (13.0%). This question allowed respondents to select multiple answers.

Table 3. Analysis of the frequency of responses regarding with whom difficult situations are most often experienced

<b>With whom do difficult situations most often occur?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
1. With management	46	40.0
2. With colleagues from the department	45	38.1
3. With people from other departments	38	33.0
4. With subordinates	15	13.0

The problems associated with these situations primarily include interpersonal conflicts and lack of cooperation (33.9%), as well as poor communication such as gossiping, lack of constructive criticism, and lack of praise (29.7%). Aggression, humiliation, lack of respect, lack of civility, and resentment were cited by 25.4% of respondents, and the same percentage cited ineffective management. 12.7% of respondents attributed difficult situations to a lack of competence, commitment, and creativity on the part of colleagues. A detailed analysis of the responses is presented in Table 4. Respondents frequently described several problems in this open-ended question.

Table 4. Analysis of the frequency of responses regarding the reasons for difficult situations in the workplace

<b>What do such situations involve?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Interpersonal conflicts and lack of cooperation	40	33.9
2. Poor communication (e.g. gossiping, lack of constructive criticism, lack of praise, lack of communication...)	35	29.7
3. Aggression, humiliation, lack of respect, lack of civility, resentment	30	25.4
4. Ineffective management (e.g. delegation of too many responsibilities or of those not related to the scope of duties, lack of solutions related to employee turnover, lack of motivational systems)	30	25.4

<b>What do such situations involve?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
5. Lack of competence, commitment, creativity	15	12.7
6. Taking advantage of position and power (e.g. nepotism, employing colleagues without education or professional training)	9	7.6
7. Organizational culture based on mobbing, lack of employee safety	4	3.4
8. Workplace pathologies (e.g. employees under the influence of alcohol, leaving early and during working hours without informing their superiors)	3	2.5
9. I don't want to write	5	4.2
10. There are no situations/I don't have any such situations	10	8.5

### **Coping with Difficult Interpersonal Situations**

The majority of respondents (N = 77, 65.3%) reported being able to cope with difficult situations. Those who struggled most often sought help from colleagues (36.8%) or superiors (26.3%), less frequently from trade unions (5.3%) or from people outside of work (5.3%). Nearly one in four respondents did not seek help from anyone (23.7%). The results are summarized in Table 5. This question allowed multiple responses.

Table 5. Analysis of the frequency of responses to the question about who respondents turn to for help in difficult situations

<b>Who do you turn to for help in dealing with a difficult situation?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Colleagues	14	36.8
2. Managers/supervisors/directors	10	26.3
3. No one	9	23.7
4. Trade unions	2	5.3
5. People outside of work	2	5.3

Table 6 presents an analysis of responses regarding how to cope with difficult situations in the workplace. Respondents typically identified several solutions. The most common responses included active listening and the use of techniques known from the literature, such as negotiation (31.4%), assertive behavior and honest conversation (29.7%), and acceptance and composure (28.8%). 19.5% of respondents indicated helplessness in these situations and succumbing to pressure from coworkers. Approximately 5.9% of respondents referred to legal regulations in problematic situations, and 6.8% sought help from others. Some also responded to difficult situations with harsh language or sarcasm (4.2%), which in the long run could contribute to increasing communication difficulties with coworkers.

These data show that difficult interpersonal situations are common in the library environment and are of a diverse nature, and the ways of dealing with them are very individual.

Table 6. Analysis of the frequency of ways of coping with difficult situations

<b>Ways of coping</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Active listening and using techniques known from literature (e.g. negotiation)	37	31.4
2. Assertive behavior, honest discussion of what happened and attempting to resolve the issue	35	29.7
3. Acceptance and composure	34	28.8
4. Helplessness, succumbing to pressure, being unable to cope with problems with coworkers	23	19.5
5. Seeking help (e.g. from supervisor, colleagues, guides, workshops)	8	6.8
6. Referring to labor law regulations and to the scope of responsibilities for a given position	7	5.9
7. Using harsh language, sarcasm, and searching for a logical solution	5	4.2
8. Venting outside of work (e.g. talking to someone)	3	2.5

### Stress, Psychological Safety, and Well-Being of the Surveyed Librarians

In open-ended responses, respondents frequently cited the fact that difficult interpersonal situations caused them significant stress (20.0%), a sense of threat, and a lack of psychological safety (9%). They also mentioned reduced mental and physical resilience (5.9%) and feeling a lack of attention to employee well-being in their workplace (4.2%). Table 7 presents a detailed quantitative summary of the responses. Some librarians addressed at least two themes in their responses, such as stress and the negative impact of difficult interpersonal relationships on their mental and physical health.

Table 7. Stress, psychological safety and well-being of respondents

<b>Statements about stress, feeling of danger, well-being</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Conflict situations in my library cause me significant stress	24	20.0
2. I feel threatened	11	9.0
3. It negatively affects my mental health	10	8.4
4. It negatively affects my mental and physical health	7	5.9
5. No one at work cares about employee well-being	5	4.2

## CONCLUSIONS

The study showed that difficult interpersonal situations occur in public libraries in Poland (76.3%) and that corrective action should be taken. Such situations most frequently occur monthly (24.6%), biweekly, weekly,

or even several times a week (11% each). They most frequently occurred in contacts with management (40.0%) and with colleagues from their own (38.1%) or other departments (30.0%). Difficult work situations primarily involve interpersonal conflicts and lack of cooperation (33.9%), as well as poor communication, such as gossiping, unconstructive criticism, lack of praise, and lack of communication (29.7%), as well as aggressive behavior, humiliation, lack of respect, lack of civility, and complaints (25.4%). Respondents also pointed out that the cause of difficult interpersonal situations may be ineffective management, e.g. incorrect delegation of tasks, lack of a motivational system or lack of a policy in the event of high employee turnover (25.4%). Around twelve percent of respondents also cited a lack of competence and commitment to work as the cause of difficult situations (12.7%). There were also voices about improper hiring practices (e.g. from family or friends), an organizational culture based on mobbing, and pathologies such as being under the influence of psychoactive substances at work. Nearly three-quarters of respondents declared that they could cope with difficult situations primarily through active listening (31.4%), assertiveness and honest conversation (29.7%), and acceptance and composure (28.8%). Many cited helplessness and succumbing to pressure from colleagues (19.5%). These individuals most often sought help from colleagues (36.8%) or superiors (26.3%). The study included numerous personal comments that demonstrated the extent to which difficult interpersonal situations at work impacted the psychophysical functioning of librarians. Twenty percent of study participants experienced significant stress as a result. 9% of them felt threatened and 8.4% mentioned mental difficulties. Approximately 6% of respondents reported that such situations worsened their mental and physical health, and 4.2% of survey participants reported that no one at their workplace seemed to care about their employees' well-being. The study findings demonstrate that difficult interpersonal situations are common in the library community, vary in nature, and that coping strategies vary greatly.

The research findings have highlighted the need for at least two-pronged action in libraries. First, there is a significant need to support employees in coping with difficult interpersonal situations. This can be achieved by organizing workshops on healthy communication, assertiveness, and ways to provide constructive feedback, as well as training in self-care, taking care of one's health and well-being, and work-life balance. Second, management and directors should be supported in implementing changes related to the creation of an effective motivational system and mentoring, coaching, and psychological support for all employees, which will deepen reflection on interpersonal relationships and the ability to constructively resolve disagreements. All of these activities should be guided by the idea of mutual concern for healthy relationships and well-being.

Finally, it's important to mention the study's limitations. Its results certainly cannot be generalized to the entire population of librarians employed in public libraries in Poland. The data only covers 118 individuals who took the time to provide comprehensive responses. Systematic research on the attitudes, preferences, and work challenges of this group of employees is crucial, especially since they work in the lowest-paid sector and constantly struggle with underfunding of their institutions. This means they often have to prove to local governments the need and benefits of a library, exposing them to constant stress and helplessness when decisions are made to close it or merge it with other institutions. This makes it even more crucial for managers of these institutions to consolidate, integrate, and support their employees in their daily professional lives and enable their development. The written statements of respondents in the studies analyzed in this text suggest directions for further research into the prospects for library professionals, their well-being, and their professional motivation. Further research should be conducted using a mixed approach, e.g. quantitative and qualitative. It is also necessary to increase the number of study participants and examine the performance of librarians from other types of libraries.

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