



Studying hybrid role reform in academic libraries: A conceptual-methodological framework and an illustrative comparative qualitative design

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid work has become a durable organizational condition in academic libraries, yet the academic-library literature still lacks designs that can show how formal hybrid arrangements are translated into everyday role expectations, job control, symbolic visibility, and workload inequity. This conceptual-methodological article develops a framework and one illustrative comparative qualitative design for studying hybrid role reform in academic libraries; it does not report empirical findings. Using Role Theory and the job demands-resources tradition as the analytic backbone, treating telepressure, technostress, symbolic visibility, and invisible labor as sensitizing mechanisms, and using intersectionality as a comparative lens, the article argues that one useful next empirical step is a multi-site comparative qualitative study. It clarifies four key constructs, advances three analytical propositions, specifies three non-exhaustive focal research questions, and outlines one illustrative single-country design that combines semi-structured interviews, policy and workload documents, abductive thematic analysis, and matrix-based cross-case comparison. An illustrative worked example shows how apparently similar hybrid policies can imply very different degrees of control, legitimacy, and workload equity. The article offers a bounded and implementable basis for future empirical inquiry into role strain, burnout risk, accommodation, retention, and service sustainability across public, technical, digital, and managerial academic-library work.

Introduction

Post-pandemic academic librarianship now confronts a work-design problem that runs deeper than a debate over how many remote days a role should allow. The central issue is not simply whether hybrid schedules exist, but how hybrid arrangements redistribute control over time, coordination, visibility, and the quieter forms of labor that keep academic library work functioning across offices, classrooms, service points, and digital platforms. In many settings, the emergency pivots of 2020 have settled into durable combinations of on-site, remote, and role-contingent work, and broader organizational research suggests that these arrangements can reshape not only where knowledge work occurs but also how it is sequenced, supervised, and evaluated (Leonardi et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021). The research problem is therefore organizational as much as spatial.

That question matters because academic librarianship was already structurally vulnerable to occupational stress before COVID-19.

Librarians routinely move among public service, instruction, research support, systems and collections work, committee labor, and, in some appointment systems, scholarship and professional leadership. Earlier scholarship linked changing academic-librarian roles to role-related job stress (Shupe & Pung, 2011), and an empirical study identified role ambiguity and overload in particular (Shupe et al., 2015). Hybrid reform enters this already layered role architecture rather than a neutral occupational setting.

That preexisting vulnerability was not only quantitative but temporal and symbolic. Liaison librarians have reported overwork, low agency, and perceived unfairness associated with burnout (Nardine, 2019), while public-service scholarship shows how institutional demands fragment and govern librarians' time (Nicholson, 2019). Taken together, these studies motivate the framework's proposition that visible service can collide with less visible preparation and relational work. Hybrid work therefore enters a profession that was already reconciling visible service with less visible intellectual and relational labor, which

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helps explain why modality changes merit study beyond scheduling preference.

Taken together, current hybrid-work studies and synthesis suggest a second insight: flexibility is analytically double-sided. For some library workers, remote or hybrid work may recover commuting time, support concentration, and improve satisfaction with work arrangements. For others, or even for the same person at different moments, it may intensify boundary erosion, technostress, message vigilance, and coordination strain. Hybrid work is therefore better treated as a design condition than as a self-executing benefit. Its effects appear to depend on work design, local norms, and the degree to which flexibility is accompanied by meaningful control (De Prosperis, 2026a; Green, 2024; McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022). The relevant question is therefore how flexibility is governed, not whether it is universally beneficial.

The current academic-library evidence base has been valuable in documenting modality prevalence, employee preferences, management challenges, and uneven eligibility across roles. It is less capable, however, of showing how librarians actually experience hybrid arrangements as changes in role boundaries, evaluation, invisible labor, and organizational power. Recent studies and evidence syntheses of reference scheduling, workspace redesign, and hybrid eligibility in job advertisements all suggest that hybrid work is being structured unevenly across library roles, yet the mechanisms behind those differences remain underexplained (Connell & Longmeier, 2025; De Prosperis, 2026a; Dong & Mabry, 2024; Hanz & McKinnon, 2025). The unresolved problem is one of explanation rather than prevalence.

What the field has captured less well is the probable tension between formal policy and lived implementation. A library may formally offer hybrid schedules while still making commitment most legible through physical presence, or it may describe flexibility in terms that leave actual discretion contingent on supervisory practice, local culture, or service emergencies. Because this gap between policy text and everyday experience is difficult to see through prevalence studies alone, the next contribution needs to be more explicitly mechanism-oriented than merely descriptive (Hosoi et al., 2021; Obenauf, 2021). This policy-practice gap is the central empirical object of the framework developed below.

Framework-development approach

This article responds to that gap with a deliberately bounded conceptual-methodological framework and an illustrative research design. It does not report completed empirical findings. Direct academic-library evidence was carried forward from the antecedent scoping review. Additional sources were selected purposively for one of three explicit functions: defining a focal construct, supplying a methodological tool, or addressing a design gap in the proposed study. Because this functional selection did not involve a comprehensive search, screening protocol, or formal appraisal, the literature serves as an input to framework construction rather than the object of a systematic, scoping, or integrative review (Jaakkola, 2020).

Framework development proceeded in four linked steps: delimiting the empirical problem identified in the antecedent synthesis; selecting Role Theory and job demands-resources scholarship as the analytic backbone; positioning telepressure, technostress, symbolic visibility, and invisible labor as sensitizing mechanisms, and intersectionality as a comparative lens; and translating that synthesis into propositions, focal questions, one illustrative study design, and a worked example. Throughout the article, citations identify evidence or concepts drawn from prior scholarship; the definitions, propositions, integrations, and design choices identified as proposed here are the contribution of this article.

That intervention aligns with published calls for future empirical work on workload governance, role clarification, post-crisis reform, and hybrid-work design in academic libraries, while giving the hybrid-work conversation a more specific methodological next step. The argument

advanced here is that one useful next study is a multi-site comparative qualitative design that can observe implementation gaps, contradictory experiences, and context-specific meanings that surveys alone cannot resolve; the framework can also support other questions and qualitative, quantitative, participatory, or mixed-method designs (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b; Johnson, 2023).

Two directly related publications should therefore be read as antecedents rather than substitutes for this article. One scoping review mapped direct and closely related academic-library work on hybrid, remote, and flexible work and concluded that hybrid work can operate as both a resource and a demand depending on task fit, meaningful control, boundary norms, workload equity, evaluation, and service sustainability (De Prosperis, 2026a). A separate conceptual article developed a broader role-architecture account of occupational stress and workload equity, arguing that overlapping service, scholarly, citizenship, and emotional-labor expectations require structural redesign rather than individual resilience alone (De Prosperis, 2026b). The present article makes a narrower and more methodological contribution: it turns those diagnoses into a framework, propositions, focal questions, and one comparative qualitative design through which the proposed mechanisms can be examined and refined.

The stakes of getting that explanation right are practical as well as scholarly. Academic libraries are already making decisions about schedules, service models, workspace allocation, accommodation, and annual evaluation under conditions of uneven staffing and fiscal constraint. When those decisions are made with only preference data in view, they risk mistaking surface consensus for durable design. A mechanism-focused study may be better positioned to indicate whether a library is moving toward a sustainable hybrid system or instead may be redistributing strain into less visible corners of the workday.

From hybrid policy to hybrid role reform

The phrase hybrid role reform is used here to denote more than a change in workplace location. It refers to the intentional or de facto reorganization of role expectations, workload boundaries, evaluation criteria, coordination practices, and availability norms when work is redistributed across remote, on-site, and mixed arrangements. This framing matters because hybrid policies do not simply move fixed tasks from one place to another. They also change which tasks remain place-bound, which become asynchronous, and how professional contribution is made legible within the organization (Biddle, 1986; De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b).

Role Theory treats an organizational role as a set of expectations attached to a social position and communicated or interpreted among a focal worker and role senders such as supervisors, users, faculty collaborators, administrators, and review bodies. Role ambiguity occurs when duties or standards are unclear; role conflict occurs when expectations are incompatible; role overload occurs when their volume or complexity exceeds available time or resources; and role strain is the broader difficulty of satisfying or reconciling role obligations. Hybrid change is therefore important not only because it modifies task location, but because it may alter who sets expectations, how conflicting expectations are negotiated, and which demands become newly visible or newly obscure (Biddle, 1986; Goode, 1960; Kahn et al., 1964).

Academic libraries are an especially strong setting for studying role reform because the profession is already layered. A single position may include user-facing service, instruction, research support, committee work, scholarly output where faculty status exists, and substantial relational or emotional labor. Earlier research has shown that academic librarians often experience stress when those layers are not clearly bounded, and role-theory work on librarians who teach shows how mixed professional expectations can become difficult to reconcile even before hybrid work enters the picture (Shupe et al., 2015; Zai III, 2015).

This reframing also draws attention to time. A remote day may protect writing, metadata, assessment, or planning time, while an on-

site day may be necessary for item-in-hand cataloging, physical processing, preservation, or specialized digitization; either setting may also involve interruption, coverage, and representational availability. Even when total workload does not change on paper, the temporal organization of the role often does. Prior time-allocation and faculty-evaluation research makes these dimensions empirically visible; whether hybrid arrangements shift what counts as productivity, what gets deferred, or what becomes difficult to defend in review systems remains a question for the proposed study (Meregaglia et al., 2021; Tosaka & Weng, 2022; Winterman & Asher, 2021).

Four article-specific terms, defined here for the proposed framework, need clarification at the outset. Hybrid role reform refers to the reorganization of role expectations and work design under hybrid arrangements. Symbolic visibility refers to the degree to which work is perceived as present, credible, and committed inside local organizational cultures, even when that work is asynchronous or off site. Invisible labor refers to necessary work that is weakly represented in workload systems or evaluative language, such as mentoring, troubleshooting, emotional regulation, preparation, and relational repair. Workload equity refers to fairness in the total pattern of demands, interruption burdens, flexibility, and recognition across roles. It does not mean that every role must have identical remote eligibility, because fairness in a hybrid environment may require different combinations of modality access, protected focus time, coverage expectations, and compensatory recognition.

Available evidence makes it reasonable to investigate whether hybrid reform may carry a moral hierarchy of presence. In many libraries, work performed at desks, in classrooms, or in visibly staffed buildings may be easier to read as fully legitimate than work performed remotely or asynchronously. Studies of post-pandemic scheduling, reference coverage, and workspace arrangements document relevant variation but do not directly test this claim; symbolic visibility is therefore framed as a hypothesis for interviews and document analysis (Dong & Mabry, 2024; Hanz & McKinnon, 2025). Physical presence does not guarantee organizational visibility. For example, work in off-site storage, centralized processing, distributed technical-services units, or systems environments may be observable to immediate colleagues while remaining weakly legible elsewhere in the library (Clarke et al., 2022; Tillman, 2023). The framework therefore treats physical presence and organizational legibility as separate analytic dimensions: work can be fully on site yet remain weakly represented in workload narratives, evaluation criteria, or organization-wide decision-making.

Role fit therefore deserves separate emphasis, but no role family is uniformly portable. Some metadata analysis, e-resource troubleshooting, systems configuration, assessment, and writing can be conducted remotely, whereas receiving, item-in-hand cataloging, physical processing, preservation, digitization, and other work requiring materials or specialized equipment may remain site-bound. Public-services work likewise ranges from place-bound desk and classroom coverage to remote consultation and digital instruction. The appropriate comparison is therefore among task portfolios and site dependencies, not a binary classification of technical work as portable and public-facing work as place-bound (Dong & Mabry, 2024; Green, 2022; Tosaka & Weng, 2022).

The emotional dimension of reform is equally important. Pandemic-era research documents uncertainty, stress, and emotional strain among New Jersey academic librarians, while reopening research identifies continued challenges involving morale, austerity, and intention to remain (Berg et al., 2022; Salvesen & Berg, 2021). These studies do not establish a hybrid-work mechanism, but they justify asking how affective burdens enter judgments of fairness alongside formal workload measures.

Conceptual backbone and key constructs

The article uses two strands as its conceptual backbone: Role Theory

and the job demands-resources (JD-R) tradition. Within this architecture, job control is treated as a key job resource, while Karasek's demand-control model provides a more specific account of how decision latitude conditions the experience of high demands. Role Theory helps explain how hybrid work can intensify or relieve ambiguity, conflict, and overload. The JD-R perspective helps explain why similar workloads may be experienced differently depending on whether workers have usable discretion, clear expectations, and sufficient resources. Together, these traditions provide a more coherent architecture than a looser collection of frameworks treated as coequal explanations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Biddle, 1986).

Role Theory is especially useful here because it accommodates both structural and interpretive complexity. It allows the study to ask how multiple role senders, layered expectations, and inconsistent norms produce strain, and it also leaves room for the possibility that workers reinterpret the same formal arrangement differently depending on local history or personal position. That flexibility is important in academic libraries, where faculty collaboration, student service, committee work, and administrative expectations often coexist within a single job and may not travel equally well across hybrid arrangements (Goode, 1960; Kahn et al., 1964).

Within that architecture, job control is the pivotal bridging construct. Karasek Jr.'s (1979) demand-control tradition remains useful because high demands are typically most damaging when workers have little influence over how those demands are met. A policy that permits remote work should not be conflated with usable discretion over pacing, sequencing, and visibility during the workday. A librarian may appear hybrid-eligible on paper and still exercise little real control if meetings dominate the calendar, availability norms remain vague, or campus presence is still treated as the clearest signal of commitment. Recent broader remote-work research reinforces this distinction, suggesting that control remains consequential even when remote work is available in principle (Becker et al., 2022).

Direct academic-library evidence points in the same direction. Among instruction librarians, job control is strongly related to burnout, and control varies across domains of work rather than existing as a single global feeling. That distinction matters here because hybrid schedules may increase discretion in one domain, such as concentration-intensive work, while leaving librarians with very little influence over meeting density, service coverage, or after-hours responsiveness in others. The proposed design therefore treats control as distributed and task specific rather than as a yes-or-no benefit of hybrid work (Johnson, 2023, 2024).

Telepressure and technostress enter this paper as sensitizing mechanisms within that backbone, not as separate grand theories. In hybrid settings, strain can grow even when formal workload does not obviously increase because workers invest more attention in message vigilance, platform switching, and the management of distributed interactions. Research on workplace telepressure and after-hours email suggests that rapid-response expectations can undermine recovery (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Tedone, 2022). Library-specific evidence is more qualified: among digital-scholarship librarians, measured technostress was not a major affliction, although organizational factors aggravated role overload and burnout (Murgu, 2021).

The framework connects these strands by treating communication pressure and technology-saturated work design as possible mediators rather than assuming that location acts directly. Murgu (2021) and Zipf (2025) concern technostress in library work; Barber and Santuzzi (2015) and Tedone (2022) establish the distinct risks of response pressure and after-hours email. Whether those mechanisms combine under durable hybrid arrangements remains a question for the proposed study.

The temporal and relational organization of public-service work reinforces this point. Instruction and liaison librarians, for example, often move between classroom teaching, consultations, outreach, committee service, email traffic, and unscheduled problem solving in ways that leave little uninterrupted time (Nardine, 2019; Nicholson, 2019). The framework proposes that role overload in such cases may arise not only

from too many tasks, but from the collision of visible service with less visible preparation and follow-up. A design centered on control and visibility is better suited to examining that possibility than one centered on location alone.

Technical and digital work presents a different but equally important configuration. Cataloging, acquisitions, e-resource, metadata, preservation, systems, and digitization work may combine concentration-intensive activity with vendor coordination, physical collections workflows, platform interruption, troubleshooting, maintenance, and informal team learning. Some responsibilities can continue remotely, whereas others depend on collections, equipment, or local infrastructure; either configuration can include essential work that remains difficult to count outside the unit. Taken together, these patterns support the article's claim that task and site dependence, rather than department label, is the more defensible basis for comparison (Clarke et al., 2022; Murgu, 2021; Tillman, 2023; Tosaka & Weng, 2022).

Evaluation and legitimacy are equally central. In faculty-status environments, the pandemic made visible how quickly service redesign, committee work, and care obligations can crowd out scholarship when review systems are slow to recalibrate. In staff-status settings, similar tensions may arise when annual-review systems informally reward responsiveness and visible campus presence more than planning, documentation, or asynchronous digital support. Prior work establishes the relevance of workload and locally appropriate evaluation criteria; whether misalignment deepens person-role conflict under hybrid arrangements is the present study's empirical question (McCormick et al., 2022; Mereaglia et al., 2021).

Invisible labor belongs inside the analytic core for the same reason. Emotional labor has documented consequences in librarianship (Matteson & Miller, 2013), while studies of academic-library valuation, systems maintenance, and racialized equity work show how essential contributions can remain weakly represented in organizational narratives or routine assessment (Clarke et al., 2022; Tillman, 2023; Vong et al., 2023). The present framework therefore asks whether hybrid arrangements make mentoring, preparation, troubleshooting, maintenance, metadata remediation, emotional regulation, and relational repair more or less legible; it does not assume a visibility effect in advance.

Intersectionality is treated here not as a separate theory competing with Role Theory, but as a comparative lens for examining how overlapping social positions and institutional power jointly shape access to flexibility, burdens, credibility, and voice; social positions are not treated as independent attributes whose effects can simply be added

(Crenshaw, 1991). Caregiving, chronic illness, long COVID, contingent employment, career stage, and racialized or gendered expectations do not simply add background detail; they can shape whether flexibility is usable, whether accommodation is legitimate, and whether invisible labor accumulates around particular workers. Library-specific research on flexible-work management and caregiving, chronic illness and long COVID, and racialized equity labor motivates examination of these configurations within the comparison rather than handling them as an afterthought (Folk, 2023; Hosoi et al., 2021; Rathbun-Grubb, 2024; Vong et al., 2023).

Institutional voice also matters because formal flexibility is more likely to become usable control when workers have credible avenues to negotiate workload, accommodation, and evaluation. Faculty status, union representation, consultative governance, and clear supervisory processes may all shape whether hybrid fairness feels stable or contingent. An empirical management study and a practice-based account of academic-library remote supervision suggest that communication, trust, and governance are part of the work-design problem rather than merely contextual background (Hosoi et al., 2021; Obenauf, 2021).

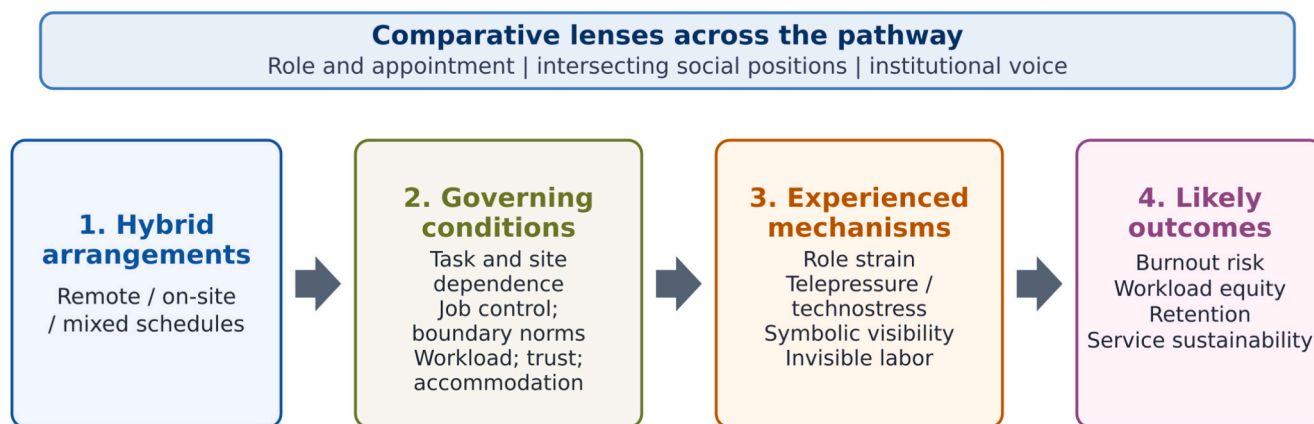
Analytical propositions developed in this article

Fig. 1 presents the framework as a left-to-right pathway. Hybrid arrangements interact with governing conditions such as task and site dependence, job control, boundary norms, workload governance, supervisory trust, and accommodation practices. The framework links those conditions to experienced mechanisms—including role strain, telepressure, technostress, symbolic visibility, and invisible labor—and to likely outcomes such as burnout risk, workload equity, retention, and service sustainability. Role and appointment, intersecting social positions, and institutional voice operate as comparative lenses across the pathway. The arrows express propositions for investigation, not established causal effects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Johnson, 2023).

The first analytical proposition is that hybrid work is most likely to function as a resource when flexibility is paired with task fit, meaningful job control, and evaluation systems that recognize contemporary library work. Satisfaction research indicates that remote-work options matter to academic-library employees, while evaluation research supports transparent, locally appropriate criteria (Green, 2024; Mereaglia et al., 2021). The proposed connection among task fit, control, evaluation, and the resource function of flexibility is the present article's synthesis to be examined empirically.

The second proposition is that hybrid work is most likely to intensify

Hybrid role reform: conceptual pathway



Heuristic pathway; relationships are propositions for empirical examination.

Fig. 1. Conceptual pathway for studying hybrid role reform in academic libraries. Note. The pathway is heuristic rather than deterministic. Comparative lenses condition each stage, and arrows represent propositions to be examined rather than established causal effects.

role strain—including ambiguity, conflict, or overload—when it redistributes coordination, telepressure, emotional labor, or visibility burdens without redesigning workloads or response norms. The current evidence base suggests that flexibility can coexist with a feeling of being perpetually at work, especially when communication multiplies and expectations remain diffuse. Under those conditions, remote or hybrid work may not remove strain so much as relocate it into domestic space, off-hours time, and continual self-management (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022; Tedone, 2022).

The third proposition is that nominally similar hybrid policies will be experienced differently across institutions because governance arrangements, appointment structures, degrees of task and site dependence, and role compositions differ. Public-facing service roles, faculty-status roles, technical roles, and managerial roles do not encounter the same combinations of place-bound work, evaluation pressure, or schedule discretion. Evidence on hybrid eligibility, reference scheduling, workspace design, and technical task portfolios establishes relevant variation; the proposed mechanism linking that variation to lived experience remains to be examined (Connell & Longmeier, 2025; Dong & Mabry, 2024; Hanz & McKinnon, 2025; Tosaka & Weng, 2022).

These propositions imply that service quality and retention should be treated as legitimate outcomes of role reform rather than as administrative concerns external to worker experience. If hybrid arrangements increase control, concentration, accommodation, and sustainability, they may support recruitment, retention, and more stable service systems. If they instead intensify turnover risk, coordination burden, or hidden inequity, the effects may appear not only in burnout risk but also in staffing continuity. Green (2024) documents satisfaction with remote-work options, willingness to consider leaving for better options, and respondents' views about recruitment and retention; Petersen et al. (2024) report perceived work-life balance, morale, retention, and productivity in a defined U.S. health-sciences-library sample. Neither study demonstrates the mechanisms proposed here.

Invisible labor and accommodation deserve special emphasis within this proposition set because hybrid fairness is often judged through them. For librarians managing chronic illness, disability, long COVID, caregiving, or disproportionate equity and mentoring work, hybrid arrangements may be simultaneously protective and precarious. The critical empirical question is not simply whether flexibility exists, but whether it is accompanied by legitimacy, support, and equitable recognition. The proposed study would therefore treat accommodation and invisible labor as constitutive features of the work system rather than as peripheral topics (Folk, 2023; Hosoi et al., 2021; Rathbun-Grubb, 2024; Vong et al., 2023).

Preference surveys remain useful, but they are limited for questions of mechanism. They can show that employees value flexibility or report modality preferences, yet they are less able to reveal how those outcomes are produced through everyday negotiations over desk coverage, meeting density, evaluation language, and the quiet expectation that some workers will absorb more visible or more interruptive labor than others. That is why the present article illustrates a comparative qualitative design while recognizing that other methods can address related questions (Green, 2023).

Table 1 translates Fig. 1 into a data-collection and analysis plan. Read each row from the analytic domain to what the study would examine and then to evidence that could make the mechanism observable. The domains are concurrent, and the indicators are sensitizing prompts rather than a fixed codebook. No single evidence source is required at every site. This operational map is the article's proposed synthesis, designed to make analytic choices transparent rather than to predetermine findings (Tracy, 2010).

Research questions

The design is organized around three focal, non-exhaustive research questions for this initial application; they are not the only questions that

Table 1
Operational map for the proposed comparative qualitative study.

Analytic domain	What to examine	Candidate evidence
Role configuration and task and site dependence	Task portability and site dependence; ambiguity, conflict, overload, and strain; visible service versus less visible preparation, processing, maintenance, and repair	Weekly-work narratives; role descriptions; task maps; schedules and coverage plans
Job control and boundary governance	Calendar and pacing discretion; meeting density; response windows; after-hours contact; protected focus time	Interviews; policy text; communication norms; shareable schedules or calendars
Visibility and invisible labor	Work seen, trusted, counted, or ignored; mentoring; troubleshooting; preparation; technical processing; relational repair	Participant examples; annual-review language; workload documents; workflow or output records
Evaluation, workload equity, and service sustainability	Evaluation fit; interruption and place-bound burden; recognition or compensation; retention; continuity	Review and promotion criteria; workload and staffing records; service-continuity evidence
Comparative power conditions	Role and appointment; intersecting social positions; institutional voice; accommodation access	Recruitment and context matrix; governance documents; accommodation and consultative procedures

can be derived from the framework. RQ1 asks how hybrid arrangements reorganize control, symbolic visibility, and task and site dependence across academic library roles and institutional settings. RQ2 asks under what governing conditions, and through what mechanisms, hybrid work is experienced as a resource, a demand, or both. RQ3 asks how those processes vary across roles, appointment structures, and intersecting power positions, with attention to caregiving, disability or chronic illness, contract status, career stage, and racialized or gendered invisible labor. The questions are deliberately narrower than the broad hybrid-work agenda because this study is designed to explain mechanisms rather than encompass every possible outcome in a single interview project (Johnson, 2023; Vong et al., 2023).

The questions are complementary rather than exhaustive. Job control, visibility, and task and site dependence form the primary analytic spine, while intersecting positional differences operate as comparative lenses within RQ3 rather than as separate parallel projects. This preserves the study's equity commitments while keeping the inquiry feasible for a sample of roughly two dozen to three dozen participants across multiple sites. Other researchers could derive additional questions or hypotheses, or use ethnographic, quantitative, participatory, longitudinal, or mixed-method designs while retaining the same conceptual pathway.

Illustrative comparative qualitative research design

The article illustrates one multi-site comparative qualitative study using abductive thematic analysis and matrix-based cross-case comparison. The primary unit of analysis is the participant-role experience of hybrid reform. These experiences are nested within institutions, which serve as comparative contexts rather than as independently measured organizational cases. This design is well suited to a problem that is simultaneously organizational and interpretive because it can compare policy language with lived implementation while preserving how participants themselves understand fairness, control, and legitimacy (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2020; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This is one theoretically aligned implementation, not a universal protocol or the only valid use of the framework.

The design is comparative in two senses. It compares librarians across role types and appointment structures, and it compares

institutions that differ in governance, mission, staffing models, and the degree to which hybrid work has been formalized. This illustrative implementation is bounded to a single-country setting so that labor arrangements, appointment systems, and policy language remain sufficiently comparable for patterned variation to emerge; the framework itself is not limited to that setting.

A realistic implementation could include approximately eight to ten academic libraries and roughly twenty-four to thirty-six participants, or about three to four participants per site. The purpose of that orienting range is not to satisfy a mechanical notion of saturation or to support site-level prevalence claims. It is to generate contrast among participant-role experiences across institutional contexts and to examine how the same broad hybrid discourse is translated into different combinations of control, visibility, and workload burden. In a design article of this kind, analytic sufficiency matters more than abstract numerical targets detached from the comparison itself.

Site selection would seek theoretically relevant variation within that single-country setting. The sample could include research-intensive and teaching-focused institutions, public and private settings, faculty-status and staff-status appointment models, and libraries with formal hybrid or workload policies alongside those relying more on supervisory discretion. Criterion and maximum-variation purposeful sampling would identify information-rich cases while preserving theoretically relevant contrast (Palinkas et al., 2015). Evidence on schedules, workspaces, and management provides context for those dimensions (Hanz & McKinnon, 2025; Hosoi et al., 2021). Governance arrangements and hybrid-policy formality would serve as the primary site-level contrasts; mission, sector, and appointment model would be treated as contextual dimensions rather than sampling quotas.

Participant recruitment would seek variation across role families without implying that any one role constitutes the default academic-library case. A sample could include public services and instruction, liaison work, acquisitions and electronic resources, cataloging and metadata, collections and preservation, systems and digital scholarship, and management. Within each family, recruitment would distinguish digitally mediated work from item-, equipment-, service-point-, interruption-, or site-dependent work so that a job title is not used as a proxy for portability or visibility (Dong & Mabry, 2024; Green, 2022; Tosaka & Weng, 2022).

Recruitment would also be attentive to equity-relevant experiences without reducing participants to checkboxes. The sample would intentionally seek variation in configurations involving caregiving, disability, chronic illness, long COVID, contingent status, career stage, race, and gender. A recruitment matrix would monitor whether relevant combinations of role, appointment, task and site dependence, and social position are present without imposing additive quotas or presuming deterministic effects. Given the sample size, the matrix would guide comparison and identify gaps rather than claim exhaustive coverage of every possible role-by-position configuration. The analytic emphasis would be on how those configurations interact with institutional rules to shape access, burden, legitimacy, and voice (Crenshaw, 1991; Folk, 2023; Hosoi et al., 2021; Rathbun-Grubb, 2024; Vong et al., 2023).

Appendix A makes implementability part of the argument by specifying inclusion criteria, interview domains, and provisional code families. The design can therefore be evaluated not only at the level of theory, but also at the level of recruitment, evidence sufficiency, and analytic coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010). The materials are adaptable examples for piloting, not a mandatory protocol or fixed codebook.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 to 75 min could form the core dataset. The interview guide would move between task arrangements, policy interpretation, control over time and sequencing, visibility and evaluation, coordination burdens, accommodation, and workload equity. Because the study is explanatory, interviews would elicit both what changed and how participants interpret those changes in relation to fairness, trust, and professional legitimacy. Existing

qualitative library research demonstrates the value of attending to participants' accounts of boundary conditions (McLay Paterson & Eva, 2022); the specific guide is proposed here.

Document analysis could proceed alongside interviews. Eligible texts would be those most likely to govern role expectations: formal hybrid-work policies, return-to-campus statements, annual-review templates, promotion and tenure guidance where relevant, workload statements, scheduling protocols, and memoranda defining service coverage or on-site presence. Optional, non-sensitive artifacts such as schedule schematics, workload worksheets, or service-coverage plans could show which forms of work are counted, collapsed, or omitted. Prior work identifies evaluation and time-allocation records as substantively relevant (McCormick et al., 2022; Meregaglia et al., 2021; Winterman & Asher, 2021); using them in this paired interview-document design is the present article's proposal. Only publicly available or voluntarily shared documents would be collected; uneven access would be logged and treated as a site-level limitation rather than filled by inference.

Analysis would follow an abductive thematic strategy combined with matrix-based cross-case comparison. Initial coding could begin with sensitizing concepts drawn from the framework, including role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, role strain, job control, symbolic visibility, invisible labor, telepressure, accommodation, and workload equity. The analysis would remain open to participant-generated categories and negative cases that complicate the framework rather than simply confirming it. Within-case memoranda would record role, institution, task and site dependence, and intersecting positional configuration before cross-case matrices compare patterns across combined configurations rather than estimate separate additive effects for identity categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2020; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Document collection also needs a clear boundary rule so that the study remains feasible. Eligible documents would be included because they govern expectations, workload, scheduling, accommodation, or evaluation, not simply because they mention remote work. A concise corpus might therefore prioritize hybrid policy, annual-review language, workload or service-coverage documents, promotion criteria where relevant, and local memoranda about meeting norms or availability. Excluding diffuse background material unless it directly shapes role expectations would help the study maintain analytic focus. This boundary is a pragmatic design decision proposed here, not a rule derived from prior management literature.

Negative cases are especially important in a design like this. Some librarians may report that hybrid work substantially reduced strain without major visibility problems, while others may prefer on-site work because it restores boundaries, collegiality, or access to better infrastructure. Those counterexamples are not threats to the framework. They are the means through which it can be refined, because they help identify which conditions may distinguish supportive reform from relocated overload (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Tracy, 2010).

Trustworthiness depends on transparency, reflexivity, and careful handling of confidentiality. Before recruitment, any implementation would require the applicable institutional research-ethics or IRB approval, exemption, or other determination, together with informed consent, secure data handling, explicit permission for any nonpublic documents, and a protocol for minimizing deductive-disclosure risk. In a relatively small profession, role descriptions can become identifiable more quickly than researchers may expect, so institutional masking, role aggregation where necessary, and careful paraphrase of sensitive policy details are essential. Credibility can be strengthened through a documented coding log, analytic memoing, negative-case analysis, and a limited member-reflection process focused on high-level interpretations rather than line-by-line verification (Birt et al., 2016). Reflexivity matters equally because a researcher situated within academic librarianship brings both interpretive insight and disciplinary assumptions that should be made visible in the analytic record (Tracy, 2010).

Illustrative worked example

A conceptual-methodological article can demonstrate analytic usefulness before a full empirical study is complete if it shows, concretely, how the framework would read organizational materials. Fig. 2 therefore provides an illustrative worked example built from two composite hybrid-policy statements. These are not findings from the proposed study. They are literature-grounded composites constructed from recurring themes in academic-library discussions of management, scheduling, evaluation, and flexibility (Dong & Mabry, 2024; Hosoi et al., 2021; Meregaglia et al., 2021).

The first composite statement offers nominal hybrid eligibility but couples it with rapid-response expectations, undefined visibility norms, and fixed coverage requirements. Read through the present framework, that policy is best understood as a weak-control arrangement: flexibility exists formally, but the librarian remains exposed to telepressure, symbolic visibility anxiety, and the relocation of burden into self-management. The second composite statement links hybrid scheduling to task mapping, protected focus blocks, explicit response windows, workload review, and documented accommodation procedures. The framework reads that policy differently because those governing conditions instantiate job-control and boundary-governance mechanisms that may make flexibility more usable; this is an analytic inference, not an intervention effect established by the cited studies (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Johnson, 2023; Tedone, 2022).

This worked example demonstrates the framework's methodological use. It distinguishes among forms of hybrid governance and shows how similar-sounding flexibility can generate different analytic expectations. Readers can see how the constructs travel from theory to policy language to anticipated empirical coding without any claim that the illustration itself constitutes evidence.

The example also sharpens a practical point that remains easy to miss in institutional discussion. Workload equity is not identical to universal remote eligibility. A site-bound librarian—whether staffing a public service point, handling physical collections, or operating specialized equipment—may nonetheless experience a fairer work system than a nominally hybrid-eligible colleague if interruption burdens, schedule autonomy, visibility expectations, and evaluation criteria are explicitly governed and recognized. This comparison is a proposition generated by the framework for empirical examination, not a finding inferred from job-advertisement evidence (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b).

Contributions and implications

The first contribution of the article is theoretical in a bounded sense. Prior scholarship has suggested, and in some settings demonstrated, that academic librarianship is structurally prone to strain when layered expectations expand without corresponding clarity or support. The hybrid-work literature, by contrast, indicates that flexibility can act as either a job resource or a job demand. The present article connects those strands by arguing that hybrid work should be studied as a site of role reform, where changes in location also reorganize discretion, evaluation, invisible labor, and symbolic legitimacy (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b; Johnson, 2023; Shupe et al., 2015).

The second contribution is methodological. The paper narrows a diffuse topic into three focal, non-exhaustive research questions, clarifies the conceptual hierarchy of the framework, and specifies one illustrative design that is explicit about unit of analysis, sampling logic, document selection, analytic procedure, and confidentiality risk. In that sense, the article aims to do more than recommend qualitative work in the abstract. It offers a design that is bounded enough to be implemented and critiqued on methodological grounds. The framework is not

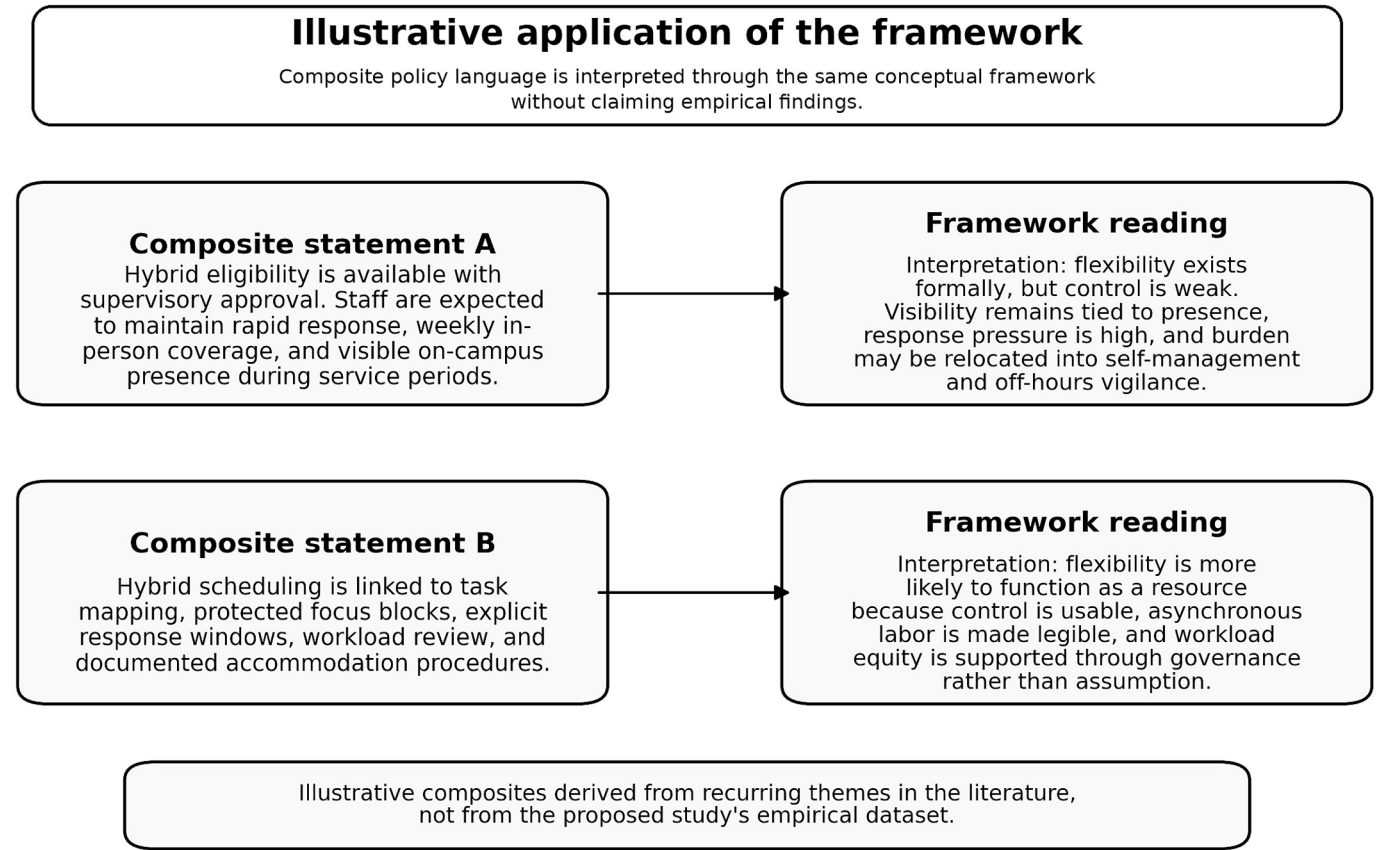


Fig. 2. Illustrative application of the framework to two composite hybrid-policy statements. Note. The statements are literature-grounded composites used to demonstrate analytic application; they are not findings from the proposed empirical study.

restricted to that design and can be adapted to other methods and settings.

The third contribution is practical. Academic libraries are already revising schedules, service models, supervision, and evaluation systems, often without a stable vocabulary for discussing the hidden costs of those decisions. The framework developed here identifies concrete organizational levers that later empirical work can examine more closely: workload audits, role memoranda, explicit response norms, protected focus time, hybrid-aware annual-review language, and accommodation procedures that do not depend entirely on supervisory goodwill. The article's synthesis is that these levers may matter more than debates over modality alone because they govern how flexibility is translated into everyday work (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b; Mereaglia et al., 2021).

A more specific implication concerns accommodation and retention. Remote or hybrid options can be especially consequential for librarians managing chronic illness or long COVID, but their value depends on whether they are treated as legitimate components of work design rather than precarious privileges. Likewise, libraries seeking to recruit and retain staff may gain little from advertising hybrid options if those options are paired with vague expectations, low control, or inequitable visibility norms. A better research base would help libraries distinguish durable design from symbolic flexibility (Folk, 2023; Green, 2024; Rathbun-Grubb, 2024).

The article also clarifies what subsequent empirical programs could do next. If qualitative comparison shows that strain centers on visibility anxiety, coordination burden, or weakly governed accommodation, those mechanisms can inform later surveys, intervention studies, and longitudinal designs. Later mixed-methods and longitudinal work could be strengthened by measuring the proposed mechanisms directly rather than treating hybrid work as a single independent variable. This sequence is proposed here; the cited studies identify adjacent measures and outcomes rather than establishing it (Johnson, 2024; Petersen et al., 2024).

The framework also sharpens the questions library leaders should ask when they defend or revise hybrid policy. Which roles enjoy meaningful control and which merely possess nominal eligibility? Which forms of work remain visible enough to be rewarded and which recede into a background of assumed availability, mentoring, troubleshooting, or representational presence? Which groups absorb the on-site and high-interruption burdens that make other forms of flexibility possible? These questions are derived from the framework rather than conclusions already established by the cited studies (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b; Vong et al., 2023).

Limitations

This article has clear limits. It is a conceptual-methodological intervention, not a report of completed interviews, and its claims about hybrid role reform therefore remain propositions to be examined rather than findings to be announced. The literature informing the framework is weighted toward North America and closely related Anglophone contexts, because that is where much of the direct academic-library evidence was located. The illustrative implementation is therefore bounded to a single-country policy context and cannot support generalization beyond the labor regimes, appointment systems, policy environments, or languages it actually samples (De Prosperis, 2026a). That concentration signals underexamination elsewhere; it is not evidence that the proposed mechanisms are unique to North American or Anglophone settings.

A second limitation is that several mechanisms highlighted here are illuminated partly through adjacent work-design literature because direct academic-library research still undermeasures telepressure, invisible labor concentration, and intersectional configurations. Because supplementary construct and method sources were selected purposively rather than comprehensively screened, relevant perspectives may remain outside the present framework (De Prosperis, 2026a). The

worked example in Fig. 2 is intended to reduce abstraction, but it is still illustrative rather than evidentiary. That limitation is not incidental. It motivates empirical work capable of examining, refining, and in some cases revising the framework proposed here (Tedone, 2022; Vong et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021).

Cross-national comparison is better treated as a separate future study. Such work would require country- and language-specific expertise, local collaborators when research extends beyond the researchers' own linguistic or national contexts, locally adapted or translated materials, and explicit attention to conceptual equivalence across labor law, appointment systems, accommodation, and governance.

Conclusion

Hybrid work in academic libraries is more productively understood as a question of role design and governance than as a narrow dispute over location preference. The sharper question for future research is how hybrid arrangements reorganize role expectations, job control, symbolic visibility, and the distribution of invisible labor across differently situated workers. Existing scholarship strongly suggests that academic librarianship is vulnerable to role strain when layered demands expand without matching clarity or support, and that flexibility can be either protective or exhausting depending on how work is designed (De Prosperis, 2026a, 2026b; Shupe et al., 2015; Shupe & Pung, 2011).

This conceptual-methodological article defines hybrid role reform as a researchable problem, uses Role Theory and job-control scholarship as a coherent backbone, advances three propositions and three focal, non-exhaustive questions, and translates that agenda into one illustrative comparative qualitative design with an explicit worked example. Its central claim is that location alone is an insufficient unit of analysis: researchers also need to examine task and site dependence, usable control, role strain, visibility, invisible labor, and institutional power. If implemented, the design outlined here could generate evidence about who receives meaningful control, whose labor remains legible, and which organizational practices are associated with more equitable and sustainable hybrid reform across public, technical, digital, and managerial academic-library work (Johnson, 2023; Mereaglia et al., 2021; Vong et al., 2023).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marco De Prosperis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly for grammar, spelling, and style edits. AI tools were not used to generate content or analyze data. The author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Appendix A. Sample interview domains, inclusion criteria, and provisional code families

Inclusion criteria. Participants would hold a current role in an academic library or closely integrated unit and would work under a durable on-site, remote, or hybrid arrangement rather than a temporary emergency exception. Recruitment would seek variation across public, instructional, liaison, technical, collections, metadata, systems, digital, and managerial work and across degrees of task and site dependence. An intersection-aware recruitment matrix could monitor relevant positional configurations without treating demographic categories as additive quotas.

Sample interview domains. Interview domains could include role architecture before and after hybrid reform; current modality and the fit between tasks and site requirements; control over calendars, pacing, and response expectations; ambiguity, conflict, overload, and role strain; visibility, evaluation, and collegial legitimacy; invisible and emotional labor; accommodation and institutional voice; workload equity, retention, and service sustainability; and participant-defined conditions of a workable design.

Illustrative intersection-aware prompts. Participants could be asked: “Which parts of your role or circumstances make the current arrangement more or less usable for you?” “What affects your ability to request flexibility, accommodation, or changes to workload?” and “When hybrid rules are interpreted differently, who has voice in those decisions?” Participants would choose what to disclose; the prompts would not require disclosure of protected characteristics.

Provisional code families. Sensitizing codes could include role configuration; role ambiguity, conflict, overload, and strain; job control; task and site dependence; boundary governance; telepressure and technostress; symbolic visibility; invisible labor; evaluation fit; workload equity; accommodation; institutional voice; and outcomes such as burnout risk, retention intention, and service sustainability. These are not a fixed codebook and would be revised through participant-generated categories and negative cases.

Intersection-aware comparison. Interviewing and analysis would examine how rules and organizational power are experienced through combinations of social position, role, appointment, and task and site dependence. Matrices would compare configurations and institutional conditions rather than estimate separate additive effects for each identity category.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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