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Changing Academic Libraries' Cultures and Empowering Minority Employees in a DEI World

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Abstract:

In the context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, this presentation will focus on culture's role in building and maintaining culturally diverse and inclusive library work environments. It will examine how tradition, bias, privilege, and racism thwart the typical library organization's quest to develop an inclusive environment. Concepts such as white and non-white styles, whiteness in libraries, microaggressions, and stereotype threats will be addressed. The presenter will equip minority librarians with tools to survive in organizations where they are othered. Through examples and strategies, non-minority librarians will also learn to manage their ethnocentric tendencies. All attendees will leave with ideas about how they can assist with enabling and sustaining diverse library organizations.

Keywords: antiracist, racism, librarians of color, whiteness, academic libraries

Introduction

Libraries in the United States and globally have diversity, equity, and inclusion committees and are mindful of inequities in a multi-racial world. However, are diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in libraries sincere, and do they create organizational change? Are we committed to creating antiracist organizations, or are we window-dressing when it comes to diversity? Ibram X. Kendi in *How to Be An Antiracist* defines antiracist as: "One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity" (24).

I ask the question about our genuineness in creating inclusive organizations because globally the travesty of our profession is that we have not learned how to hire and retain librarians of color or how to create organizational structures that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) librarians can feel comfortable in and respected. The minority librarians who have succeeded in libraries endure discrimination, microaggressions, and an unfair playing field. It takes a certain level of resiliency for these librarians to survive. I learned either from them telling me directly or through the literature about the

librarians in Sweden, Iran, Canada, Germany, France, and the United States' lived experiences regarding being discriminated against or othered in the workplace.

Let me share a few examples:

Middle Eastern Librarian:

A librarian leader from the Middle East spoke of not receiving credit for the work she has accomplished and that men take credit for her work. She spoke, too, about men in the library being insubordinate or ignoring her.

Immigrant Librarian in Europe:

An immigrant librarian of color in Europe shared how she had been discouraged from applying for a vacant position that appeared to be a reference or public services position. She was told it would be a lot of work. A male colleague, who did not have librarian training, got the job. After he did, she checked, and the desk was not busy.

In addition, she said, "I received a very poor starting salary in 2016 when I began working. I was an above salary negotiator. And my salary was the worst among librarians. In those days, it was not important that you were educated. I also had seven years of experience behind me and spoke another language besides French and English, something that was important for this library. Nevertheless, I received a library assistant salary according to a salary list of all employees. . . ."

An Asian Librarian in library school in Europe:

A United States Vietnamese librarian attended library school in Europe and there were no other librarians of color in her class. During a class discussion about race that the faculty member initiated, the majority of the white class members became tense or rejected the idea of discrimination. In Scotland and the United Kingdom, she experienced anti-Chinese sentiment.

African American/Hispanic Librarians in the United States:

An African American male in a university library sits at the reference desk under a large "Reference" sign. A student approached the desk and asked the man, "Do you work here?"

African American and Hispanic librarians are often hired in the ethnic studies areas and access services which are departments that can be very isolated from the main action of a library. These librarians are sidelined in libraries but counted on statistics to show diversity.

A Filipino Librarian in the United States:

A Filipino librarian worked for a major Library Management System vendor on their Help Desk. After she had helped white librarians, they consistently went behind her back and contacted her supervisor to make sure she had provided them with the correct answer.

There are countless stories of macroaggressions and microaggressions against librarians of color in libraries. They are denied positions, promotions, professional development opportunities, and a fair salary.

The problem is that libraries are largely white settings. Since 2000, a body of literature has sprung up regarding whiteness in libraries. Isabel Espinal at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst was one of the first librarians to write about this concept. For another good reference on "whiteness" read Todd Honma's "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies" *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 2005.

Robin DiAngelo, in her article “White Fragility” in *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, cites Frankenberg (1993), who defines whiteness as multi-dimensional:

Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (1).

Frankenberg offers us a useful definition of whiteness to remember in assessing libraries. Moreover, Michelle Fine, in discussing the insulated environment of whiteness in her chapter “Witnessing Whiteness” in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, said: “I find myself trying to understand how whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity”(57).

From my long experience in academic libraries, I have witnessed that colleagues always give white librarians the “benefit of the doubt” even when they perform poorly. Conversely, librarians of color are appraised harshly and assumed to be deficient if a task is done incorrectly or a deadline is missed. There is a significant double standard that our white colleagues refuse to address in libraries. This leads to resentment by librarians of color and accusations of bias and discrimination.

When United States librarians of color use the term “whiteness,” they are referring to white librarians’ cultural biases and how their white colleagues do not understand how their whiteness allows them to navigate the world from a privileged position.

In addition to whiteness, female librarians of color are affected by their gender, especially women leaders. Kimberly Crenshaw, in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” wrote the seminal work on intersectionality. She states that Black (I’m adding Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Aboriginal) women often experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the bases of sex (49). She further argues that Black women (I’m adding Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Aboriginal) can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men.

It is also true that white women librarian leaders deal with gender bias. For example, they have difficulty recovering from a leadership failure as head of a library and being restricted by unspoken professional standards. Of course, using unwritten criteria and not surviving a leadership or project debacle is often career-ending for librarians of color, at least at the leadership level. On the other hand, male librarian leaders of all ethnicities are fired multiple times, and they are rehired by another library.

In the United States, we have been working on diversity in libraries and failing for fifty years. We have been ineffective in solving the problem despite numerous American Library Association, Association of College & Research Libraries, and Association of Research Libraries task forces, white papers, residency programs, and mentoring programs. In 1995-1996, ALA President Betty Turock and ALA Executive Director Elizabeth Martinez founded the Spectrum Scholars initiative, dedicated to diversifying the profession. Specifically, the Spectrum Program actively recruits and provides scholarships to American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern and North African, and/or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students to assist them with obtaining a graduate degree and leadership positions within the profession and ALA.

Spectrum has helped but has yet to have the significant impact in diversifying the profession we expected. I levy this criticism as an American Library Association insider because I was the inaugural Chair of the

ACRL Dr. E.J. Josey Spectrum Scholar Mentor initiative and, with others, developed this mentoring program. I worked on this task for five years. Nevertheless, in our libraries, racism impacts the Spectrum Scholars, too. In 2018, I learned from Gwendolyn Prellwitz, Assistant Director, Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services and Spectrum Scholar Coordinator at the American Library Association, that “20 percent of scholars leave libraries because of racial trauma that includes hostile work environments, harassment, and oppression.”¹

So, why have the United States and the world’s libraries not welcomed librarians of color? Kendi posits that “Behavioral-enrichment programs, like mentoring and educational programs, can help individuals but are bound to fail racial groups, which are held back by bad policies, not bad behavior. . . . (202).” Kendi is right about mentoring programs helping individuals. But I cannot entirely agree with the latter half of his statement. In libraries, it is the unchecked biased and racist behavior by mostly white individuals who deliberately seek to force people of color out of their jobs. Given that the number of librarians of color is so small, having a revolving door due to inequitable policies and hostile environments in libraries is a problem. Let’s look at the demographic data for library professionals in the United States.

Diversity and Demographics of Library Professionals

The Department for Professional Employees AFL-CIO, in its “2023 Library Professionals: Facts and Figures,” states, “The librarian profession suffers from a persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity that has not changed significantly over the past 15 years” (3).

Just over 82 percent of librarians identified as white in 2022. . . . In 2022, only 4.3 percent of librarians identified as Black or African American, a steep decline from 9.5 percent in 2020. Librarians who identified as Hispanic or Latino (of any race) numbered 8.0 percent, and those identifying as Asian-American or Pacific Islander made up 5.1 percent (4).

Women represented 82.2 percent of graduates in Master of Library Science (MLS) programs in 2018-2019. However, Black women only accounted for 4.5 percent of all MLS graduates, while Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander women made up 7.8 and 2.5 percent of the 2019 class, respectively (5).

Thus, there are not enough librarians of color to fill jobs in academic and public libraries. Hiring a diverse staff for many libraries is almost impossible, unless we are raiding from each other. The numbers tell us that the BIPOC librarians our libraries need do not exist.

When we look at the context of libraries, the demographics of library workers, the fact that libraries adhere to best hiring practices, along with the collective failure of library leadership globally to diversify and retain librarians of color, I must ask this question: Are library organizational cultures and structures racist?

Because of the utter failure in the United States to diversify libraries, I had to ponder this question for a long time. Ultimately, I decided not to condemn all library organizations. I believe libraries suffer from racist individuals, groupthink, passiveness, unpleasant people who mistreat all colleagues, and leadership failure that creates unwelcoming library cultures for all employees, specifically for people of color. However, from reading the literature, I think there are BIPOC Generation X and Millennial librarians who would say that library organizational cultures and structures are racist. The fact that libraries may be unfriendly places for ethnic librarians and patrons is a reality that leaders cannot continue to ignore.

¹ There is no current statistical data about trauma and Spectrum Scholars.

We know that culture is difficult to change. Academic libraries' cultures mirror the elitism of the academy and our campuses which prevents librarians of color from thriving and sometimes even being hired. But I am calling for radical change in the 21st century. We need to blow up the current hierarchical, traditional library organizational structure that is over one hundred years old. This structure separates us into silos and makes it easy to ostracize, label, and demoralize people.

Many United States libraries in the 1990s to early 2000s participated in the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement aimed at changing organizational structures. The University of Arizona Libraries, Oregon State University Libraries, and Pennsylvania State University Libraries were TQM shops. The goal was to create an environment of continuous improvement and flatter library organizational structures by using cross-functional teams. The movement waned, but it was a step in the right direction regarding creating an organization where all employees' voices were heard.

Library leaders are key in changing libraries, and we have given "leaders" a pass for far too long. Without library leadership stepping up, we will not succeed in creating antiracist organizations.

Culture

One size won't fit all libraries in creating new cultures and organizational structures. I have experimented with doing the following:

- Included diversity, equity, and inclusion in our library's mission, vision, and strategic plan.
- Ensured the playing field is level for all employees (librarians and staff) and promoted professional development.
- Established a set of values for the organization and used them in hiring.
- Used organizational and individual librarian goals to move an organization forward (negotiate goals).
- Created a Collections, Access, and Discovery Department (combined Tech Services and Access Services). This arrangement is more inclusive, especially for work environments and meetings.
- Promoted engagement through cross-functional committees for librarians and staff.
- Created the Coordinator of Graduate Programs and the Coordinator of Instruction and Undergraduate Programs, which cut across the traditional structure lines to bring librarians together.
- Expanded the Dean's Council to include key representatives from across the building, which enhances communication, planning, and developing future leaders.
- Hired an Associate Dean for Student Success and Diversity.
- Used the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Committee to assist with diversity training, programming, and work.
- Supported a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) collection audit that removed offensive cataloging headings.
- Reorganized the organization.
- Established an Artwork Committee to bring diverse art into the library building.

Deans

If you want to create a diverse and inclusive organization, you need to:

- Commit to creating a diverse, inclusive antiracist organization, and develop an action plan.
- Ensure your library's mission, vision, and values statements mention diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- Diversify your management team with at least two ethnic librarians/people (change will start to happen automatically).
- Expand your management team meetings beyond Associate University Librarians (AUL) and alternate which non-AUL librarians are selected every two years.
- Consider implicit biases in your and other library employees' decisions and disputes, especially when a librarian of color is involved.
- Give librarians of color the benefit of the doubt. Stop them when the AUL talks with you about the horrible librarian of color. If a BIPOC librarian is upset, there's a reason. He or she is not crazy. It's a sign you should dig further. Invite the librarian to your office for a conversation.
- Meet with all new librarians as a group for one hour three times per year. Ensure growth and development for all employees.
- Ask a librarian of color to chair a committee or significant task force. This may mean not giving the task to an Associate University Librarian.
- Provide opportunities for people from across the organization to collaborate.
- Challenge the hiring committee on choosing people like them.
- Confront departments or AULs about a librarian of color revolving door syndrome. Demand accountability and change.
- Use the Associate Dean or the DEI Committee to introduce readings and antiracists training to all library personnel.
- Eschew putting a person of color in a dysfunctional department or assigning them to the library's bully.
- Learn about black and white styles and microaggressions.
- Experiment with a new organizational structure to create more cohesion and inclusiveness.

Librarians of color surviving in a DEI World

If you want to survive and thrive in the workplace, you need to:

- Get a mentor.
- Learn about the library head or library's reputation before accepting a position. Because you have been offered employment, don't let your ego get the best of you. Tap your network. If you don't have a network, select an organization whose mission statement mentions diversity and inclusion (libraries aren't ready to be antiracist yet).
- Negotiate for professional development during the hiring process. Invest in yourself (professional development) until you can get the job that will pay for it.
- Understand that the academy is a place for privileged people (students and faculty). Become secure in who you are as a professional.
- Stop focusing on naysayers and do your job. You do not need to be affirmed by others. The enemy incapacitates you when you pay attention to what they are saying.
- Consider the spectrum of libraries for a career. You can work in a small or medium academic library, a research library, a public library, or a special library (rural vs. urban).
- Serve on library committees and take "stretch" assignments. Don't isolate yourself.
- Join an ethnic caucus, a space for librarians like you, and identify a few white librarians (allies) you can trust. You need both perspectives to grow and survive.
- Move to get a better job. In the United States and perhaps other parts of the world, it is necessary to move to get a job or promotion.
- Seek a community on campus and off campus as soon as you arrive in a new town.
- Learn the culture of your departments, library, and institution. Second, learn the written and unwritten rules of your library environment and university.

- Avoid Stereotype Threat – “Stereotype threat” is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we worry that our behavior may confirm negative stereotypes about our racial, ethnic, or gender group.²

White Librarian Allies

If you want an equitable and fair workplace, you need to:

- Give BIPOC librarians the benefit of the doubt.
- Serve as a mentor or invite a librarian of color to coffee or lunch. Stop by their office to periodically say hello.
- Participate in search committees with a goal of evaluating all candidates fairly and creating a comfortable environment during the process, especially for candidates that don’t look like you.
- Abstain from participating in white racial bonding acts. Speak up when you hear unfair, judgmental statements about a minority colleague.
- Commit to being honest with a BIPOC colleague rather than cuddling them. Otherwise, you sabotage the librarian.
- Read the antiracists literature. This will help some, but the lived experience of librarians of color cannot be replicated.
- Pay attention to how women and BIPOC are treated in meetings.
- Join your library’s DEI Committee or create one. We need white librarians on these committees.
- Avoid being intimidated by forthright BIPOC librarians or labeling them during the interview process.
- Explain the profession and/or library organization to new BIPOC librarians and assist them with joining professional committees.
- Volunteer to work in a minority community service organization to broaden your understanding of a different culture.
- When you witness discrimination, don’t approach the victim later to offer sympathy. Give them your support in the moment.

Conclusion:

Librarianship is a great profession. White female and male librarians must understand that they play a role in affecting cultural change and retaining librarians of color. Changing libraries will take all of us. Globally, we must stop denying that racism exists in libraries. In the United States, having the profession suffer from a persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity for the past fifteen years is unacceptable. Melanie Huggins, Executive Director, Richland Library, Columbia, South Carolina, in her piece, “Becoming an Antiracist Library” in *Public Libraries* asserted that the work of being an antiracist library deals with inequities, one decision, one interaction, at a time. . . .Looking at each decision through a lens of justice, equity, and reconciliation (4).

In the digital age, we have transformed our library buildings and services. We must follow suit and change our cultures and organizational structures to be a haven for our patrons, librarians, and staff of color. The revolving door for BIPOC librarians in library organizations must cease. Accordingly, library leaders must lead this change just as we have championed fundraising, advocated for new building projects, and implemented integrated library systems.

² Claude Steele, former dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, and his colleagues coined the term “stereotype threat.”

We do not have another fifty years to wait until libraries achieve diversity. Thus, **A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION IS NEEDED THAT INCLUDES** IFLA, national library associations, libraries of all types, library schools, and librarians to immediately address dismantling inequitable cultures, policies, and organizational structures to create antiracist libraries if we want to retain librarians of color to meet our patrons' needs.

Finally, Kendi reminds us, “the heartbeat of racism is denial, the heartbeat of antiracism is confession” (235).

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