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Title

Intersectionality at the Reference Desk: Lived Experiences of Women of Color Librarians

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30r7s9nw>

ISBN

978-1-63400-018-5

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Publication Date

2017-10-01

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

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INTERSECTIONALITY AT THE REFERENCE DESK: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN OF COLOR LIBRARIANS

*Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho**

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to personal identity, social categories, and being a librarian, there are many nuanced aspects of how one operates in libraries. Within the field of librarianship, there has not been a lot of research conducted to understand the connections between how an individual is treated in the workplace based on their perceived gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other identities. We sought to answer the questions: How do women of color librarians experience patron interactions, and how do their intersecting identities shape the way they approach public service? Through interviews with women of color librarians working in academic, public, and school libraries, we learned about the lived experiences of women of color librarians who interact with the public in the workplace. The major themes we will explore in this chapter are labor, perceptions of competency and authority, questioning personal identity and sexual harassment, and self-care.

While our questions focused on interactions at the reference desk, we acknowledge that reference interactions happen at other access points and spaces, such as circulation and information desks or online. We chose to focus on one-on-one in person interactions instead of larger interactions, such as instructional classes, because of the intimacy

* Both authors contributed equally to the research project and chapter. The order of authors is alphabetical.

of those smaller interactions. The reference desk is an established point of connection where patrons and librarians interact and exchange information. There are certain service expectations that come with this space; a librarian should be friendly and approachable and help patrons to the best of their ability. But there are particular power dynamics also at play in this exchange which gives the added potential for oppressive—sometimes racist, sexist, homophobic, or xenophobic—behavior to exhibit itself, putting the librarian in direct line to receive these comments. Sometimes these acts of oppression are subtle, and are expressed through more nuanced ways as we begin to explore in this research project. Honma writes, “All too often the library is viewed as an egalitarian institution providing universal access to information for the general public. However, such idealized visions of a mythic benevolence tend to conveniently gloss over the library’s susceptibility in reproducing and perpetuating racist social structures found throughout the rest of society.”¹ The reference desk is no exception to this.

Library literature on feminism and gender often excludes the perspectives of women of color;² and existing literature on librarians of color mainly focuses on recruitment and diversifying the profession.³ Recently there has been some research conducted about racism and microaggressions⁴

1 Todd Honma, “Trippin’ Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,” *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2005): 1-26.

2 Suzanne Hildenbrand, “Library Feminism and Library Women’s History: Activism and Scholarship, Equity and Culture,” *Libraries & Culture* 35, no. 1 (2000): 51-65; Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, “Power, Knowledge and Fear: Feminism, Foucault, and the Stereotype of the Female Librarian,” *The Library Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1997): 250-266.

3 Kyung-Sun Kim and Sei-Ching Joanna Sin, “Increasing Ethnic Diversity in LIS: Strategies Suggested by Librarians of Color,” *The Library Quarterly* 78, no. 2, (2008): 153-177; Barbara Dewey and Jillian Keally, “Recruiting for Diversity: Strategies for Twenty-first Century Research Librarianship,” *Library Hi Tech* 26, no. 4 (2008): 622-629; Emily Love, “Generation Next: Recruiting Minority Students to Librarianship,” *Reference Services Review* 38, no. 3 (2010): 482-492; and Anjali Gulati, “Diversity in Librarianship: The United States Perspective,” *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions* 36, no. 4 (2010): 288-293.

4 Microaggressions are defined as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.” Derald Wing Sue, “Microaggressions: More than Just Race,” *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>.

in academic libraries⁵ and a book published on the experiences of academic librarians of color⁶, yet we have been unable to find more in-depth research that focuses on the work experiences of women of color librarians in all types of libraries. There are several ways an individual can experience discrimination and discomfort in how others treat them. A study on librarian approachability in an academic library found that “societal structure influences how patrons perceive librarian approachability,”⁷ showing that one’s perceived social categories can impact how the public perceives and treats an individual working in public services. Our research builds on current discussions around diversity, microaggressions, and intersectionality in libraries, which range from conference presentations⁸, articles,⁹ and other

5 Jaena Alabi, “Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Survey of Minority and Non-minority Librarians,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 1 (2015): 47-53; Jaena Alabi, “‘This Actually Happened’: An Analysis of Librarians’ Responses to a Survey about Racial Microaggressions,” *Journal of Library Administration* 55, no. 3 (2015): 179-191.

6 Rebecca Hankins and Miguel Juarez, eds, *Where Are All the Librarians of Color?: The Experiences of People of Color in Academia* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2015).

7 Jennifer L. Bonnet and Benjamin McAlexander, “Structural Diversity in Academic Libraries: A Study of Librarian Approachability,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 38, no. 5 (2012): 277-286.

8 Eboni M. Henry et al, “Librarians of Color: The Challenges of ‘Movin’ On Up” (Part II),” Panel presentation at the American Library Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA, June 27, 2015, <http://alaac15.ala.org/node/28885>; Juleah Swanson et al, “From the Individual to the Institution: Exploring the Experiences of Academic Librarians of Color,” Panel presentation at the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Portland, OR, March 26, 2015, <http://acrl.learningtimesevents.org/from-the-individual-to-the-institution-exploring-the-experiences-of-academic-librarians-of-color-2>.

9 Juleah Swanson et al, “Why Diversity Matters: A Roundtable Discussion on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/why-diversity-matters-a-roundtable-discussion-on-racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-librarianship>; Fobazi Ettarh, “Making a New Table: Intersectional Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/making-a-new-table-intersectional-librarianship-3>; Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship>.

library community projects.¹⁰ As issues of race and gender become more widely acknowledged in the consciousness of librarians, we hope that this research will be beneficial to the field of librarianship, as the profession strives for inclusivity, diversity, and social responsibility in the workplace.¹¹

Our interest in this research project stems from our involvement in other projects within the profession of library and information science (LIS). We are both on the LIS Microaggressions team, where we help distribute and promote the project, and the zine associated with it. The purpose of the LIS Microaggressions project is to provide a space which “aims to identify, acknowledge, and overcome the microaggressions that continue to exist in our profession and that are the real, lived, experiences of LIS professionals from marginalized communities today.”¹² We are both alumni of the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Underrepresented Groups, where intimate conversations between other librarians of color illustrated that many of us have dealt with prejudice and microaggressions in the workplace. These conversations are often held among peers who may have similar experiences, but they’re not often communicated to the profession at large. Upon reflection of what feminism and the reference desk would be to us, it became clear that intersectionality would be a key factor in understanding the experiences that other women of color might face in the workplace, and particularly how they interface with the public and their coworkers.

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and she states that the “experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.”¹³ Intersectionality studies the ways

10 *Microaggressions in Librarianship*, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.lismicroaggressions.com>; #critlib, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://critlib.tumblr.com>.

11 “Core Values of Librarianship,” *American Library Association*, June 29, 2004, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues>.

12 “About,” *LIS Microaggressions*, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://lismicroaggressions.tumblr.com/about>.

13 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991): 1244.

in which multiple social and cultural identities impact individual experience, allowing for a more holistic view of our lives. Looking at race and gender isolated from each other fails to see the many dimensions in which they intersect and overlap, creating a complicated lived experience that cannot be captured by studying one identity.¹⁴ We felt that it was important to examine and explore the experiences of women of color librarians using intersectionality as our framework for understanding. As we discovered in our interviews, many of the women we talked to were treated differently on the basis of social categories such as their race, gender, and sexual orientation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since this project places a high value on personal experiences, we chose a feminist interviewing methodology where we conducted interviews to hear in-depth accounts from women of color librarians. The qualitative method of interviewing allowed us to gain more insight and nuance into the complexities of race and gender than other commonly used quantitative methods such as surveys. It was very important for us to make the participants feel that they were the experts, not us—we were not there to doubt or question their experiences but to learn about them. Traditionally, studies using interviews often create an unequal power dynamic, where the interviewer is the expert and participants are simply objects in the study. We wanted to ensure that wasn't the case in our interviews, especially since the experiences of people of color and women have historically been doubted and deemed invalid by mainstream society. Furthermore, we believe that building a power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee obstructs learning by creating barriers. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber's work was especially helpful to us as we designed our research study.¹⁵

Self-reflection was another important aspect of feminist methodology we prioritized. We actively took time to self-reflect throughout the entire research process, from creating our recruitment

14 Stephanie Guittar and Nicholas Guittar, "Intersectionality," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 657-662.

15 Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, "The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing," in *Feminist Research Practice*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc., 2007), 111.

questionnaire and interview questions to reflecting before and after our interviews. We acknowledged our own identities as “insiders” and “outsiders”—we are insiders in that we are both women of color and librarians, yet we are outsiders in that we are the researchers and may not racially identify with most of our participants. We discussed the balancing act of being completely open to whatever our participants said while also not having a specific agenda to confirm our own assumptions or guesses.

We recruited participants by creating a call for volunteers including an online questionnaire that was sent out to various library listservs and publicized on social media. Using the method of purposive sampling, we selected our fourteen participants based on their recruitment questionnaire responses, specifically their answers to two free response questions.¹⁶ We wanted to interview people who had experiences they were very open to sharing and intersectional themes they wanted to discuss with us. The demographics of our participants were broad, coming from all regions of the United States and identifying as multiracial, African American, Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American. Their years of experience working in libraries range from under one year to over fifteen years. Four of our interviews were conducted in person, and the remaining ten were conducted either by phone or through a video conference call.

We do not believe that objectivity is possible in conducting research or in the practice of being librarians. Everyone comes into their work with their own experiences and biases, and we acknowledge that this research study reflects our own interests. If we were not interested in these themes, we would not have conducted this study. We are two Asian-American women who are early-career librarians and have both worked in public services. Our perspectives going into the research project, conducting interviews, and analyzing data are affected by our backgrounds and experiences. We asked questions and selected participants based on themes we wanted to hear about, but we were also completely open to anything our participants shared with us. While we expected to hear some of the findings discussed

¹⁶ The two free response questions were: How does your personal identity affect how you approach working at the reference desk?; The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women of color librarians who interact with the public, and to understand how their personal identities shape how they approach their work. What themes or topics would you be interested in talking about if selected for an interview?

later in this chapter, our findings are largely things we did not expect or think about when starting this research project.

When we discuss our initial findings in this chapter, we rely heavily on direct quotes from our participants. We believe that the voices of our participants speak for themselves, and it is not always necessary to add our own words, or reference the works of others, to provide further understanding. It is integral to our feminist methodology that we do not have to follow the same traditional scholarly publishing rules that have been so ingrained in our education. We struggled with balancing long-held scholarly impulses with the aspiration to find another way to best share our research.

FINDINGS

A. Labor

Throughout our interviews, we noticed a thread of comments related to the labor involved in being a woman of color librarian. Over half of our participants are either the only librarian of color or one of few librarians of color at their past and current institutions. This lack of a diverse workforce creates a work environment that can feel isolating and discouraging.

What often results from being the only librarian of color is that they are the only person doing “diversity work” or the only person being asked to. Examples of diversity work include conducting outreach to diverse communities, attending workshops related to diversity, serving on diversity committees, creating LibGuides for ethnic studies areas, and forwarding job announcements to ALA ethnic caucus listservs. Our participants do this type of work because it’s important to them personally and they care deeply about these issues. One participant explained that while she is known as “the diversity person,” she doesn’t really mind being asked first to do these types of projects:

It’s a mix of being known as a person that will always take diversity projects, but also that I like diversity projects. For example with the Muslim Student Association, I want to make sure that they feel welcome in their library because sometimes the campus can be you know, not welcoming. So if I can show them that they have an ally in the library or at least with me as a librarian, then I want to do that. I

want to see students succeed to stay and finish their programs, to end their programs, that motivates me in the projects I choose.

More than one participant has stated that it would be great if more white colleagues volunteered to do diversity work. One participant said, “We have a lot of diversity programming but it’s always the same people. You’re preaching to the choir and so I’m not sure how effective we’re going to be able to be if we’re on the road to address some of those structural issues, it’s really, really challenging.” She went on further, “I feel like it has to be everybody’s responsibility, and if this is something that we say is important to the library and the university, to me there should be some consequences if you don’t participate.” Another problem is that even when white colleagues do volunteer to work on diversity initiatives, librarians of color then have the burden of explaining basic concepts, and it becomes more work to collaborate with someone who lacks knowledge of diversity issues. As one participant described:

Sometimes it can feel like I’m sort of a poster child for all things black...I do feel kind of like when people have questions, or when people need to kind of talk about something uncomfortable, or put someone in the department on the race issue, it’s me. And that’s fine cause that’s what I want, but still it does feel a little like tokenism, it kind of feels like I don’t want to necessarily be doing this by myself and when I do want to collaborate, it’s with a white colleague who doesn’t know as much, and that’s not a jab against them, they want to know more, they want to learn, but I’m working with someone who is not quite as knowledgeable on these issues and who doesn’t quite even have the rhetoric to approach it from a certain angle. I feel like I’m explaining and trying to validate my experiences to them, then we can move toward this conference proposal, or toward this whatever it is that we’re doing. So yeah, it’s been a struggle.

Another participant described her work environment when it comes to diversity projects: “I think there is more of a collaborative effort on projects, so it’s nice to see that it’s not just the same person over and over again. They don’t ask me first, for every diverse project that they could ask. They ask certain ones to work on the Black Lives Matter displays, and that’s good I don’t have to be the person every time and I feel that it’s more encouraging to see that every day and everyone is involved actively.”

An organization's overall lack of awareness or practice of diversity initiatives can send the message that diversity work is not valued as highly as other library work. Anantachai, Booker, Lazzaro, and Parker observe, "diversity research can often be viewed as 'unofficial work' that is not recognized as fitting into a traditional scholarly paradigm."¹⁷ One participant said:

I call it the black tax, like it's the extra work that you have to do that is largely unrewarded and uncompensated. It's like, I don't mind the diversity leadership team and serving as a mentor, but I also want to have time to do other things as well and maybe if other people in the library would step up and do some of these things then you wouldn't always be looking to me, so those are the kinds of structural types of things that I think we could do much better jobs to address.

Another dimension of this issue of diversity work being valued less is the perceived lack of competency that many women of color librarians face, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Furthermore, a recent study on business executives and diversity-valuing behaviors may add some additional troubling context. Diversity-valuing behaviors in this study are defined as behavior that promotes demographic balance within organizations, such as respecting cultural and gender differences and valuing working with a diverse group of people. The study found that "women and nonwhite executives who were reported as frequently engaging in these behaviors were rated much worse by their bosses, in terms of competence and performance ratings, than their female and nonwhite counterparts who did not actively promote balance...We found clear and consistent evidence that women and ethnic minorities who promote diversity are penalized in terms of how others perceive their competence and effectiveness."¹⁸

17 Tarida Anantachai, Latrice Booker, Althea Lazzaro, and Martha Parker, "Establishing a Communal Network for Professional Advancement Among Librarians of Color," in *Where Are All the Librarians of Color? The Experiences of People of Color in Academia*, eds. Rebecca Hankins and Miguel Juarez (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2015): 39.

18 Stefanie K. Johnson and David R. Hekman, "Women and Minorities Are Penalized for Promoting Diversity," *Harvard Business Review*, March 23, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/03/women-and-minorities-are-penalized-for-promoting-diversity>.

Other issues with being one of the very few librarians of color include the themes below.

Isolation and Exclusion

I am the only, as far as I know, queer librarian at my institution that I've met. I'm sure there are some others, but I don't know who they are. I'm definitely the only black queer person. I think I am legitimately the only black person in the library system.

They were asking me, "what other black librarians work where you do?" I was like "Oh I guess it's just me." It was the first time I really laid out that number. And there might be one other person, but I haven't personally met her. But really it's the fact that I can count on one hand the number of people not only who are black and queer, but who are just black at my library. It's a little disconcerting at the moment.

I tended to be kind of ostracized by some of my other colleagues. They tended to—they wanted to work together and they didn't really want me to be involved. And so that on top of the fact that I was the only black woman, the black librarian, really the only librarian of color period. It was—it could be very isolating.

Being Judged

One of our participants who identifies as Latina and works with a lot of Latina students in an academic library says that her colleagues constantly criticize, both directly and indirectly, that she has long research appointments with students. She said:

I feel like Mexican-American women talk about certain things, like you have to chat before you get to the bulk of the question. I've had co-workers say, "well you take so long with them." That's uncomfortable for me, to feel like I'm helping someone but I'm constantly being judged. I've been working in this for about 15 years so I shouldn't have to prove what I'm doing to you.

Structural Racism

One of the things that I've always been really big on is a job description that is reflective, not of a particular experience but of the work that you need that person to do. So being really realistic about what it takes to do the job I think that's a real struggle. I think people aren't aware of that. You know we complain about not having a diverse library staff,

and we say well we always recruit the same kind of people and to me what that says is that we're reproducing ourselves. We are looking for people like ourselves and what we're looking for isn't really required to do the job, for example, sometimes for our introduction we ask for two years of library experience, and so rather to me two years of post MLS experience for entry level job is a lot. So you gotta really think about what kind of experience someone is going to have, or what, who would have had an opportunity to get that experience.

I remember interviewing a woman...They asked me to serve on the interview panel for the vacancy I had left. She applied for the position, she's Latina, and the question came up, "Where do you see yourself in 5 years?" And she said, "I see myself as a branch manager." And these women that I had worked with for years and years and years, they were just taken aback by the fact that she would be so ambitious as to want to be a branch manager. And I was sitting there like, really? Are you kidding me? And so they did not hire her...I thought to myself now if a white male had come in and sat in the same chair and said he wanted to be the branch manager in 5 years, would they have batted an eye? And it was kind of like oh I guess she was too spicy, I mean that was kind of how they had her sort of framed as being really aggressive, and she wasn't aggressive. But yeah, she was ambitious, and why is that a problem?

I've worked in places where people said "oh it really would be nice if we could find a children's librarian of color. And if only I could find one." To which my response is where are you looking? That idea that we're committed to in theory diversity, but in practice means that one, it's a stated goal somewhere, whether it's in a strategic plan, whether it's in a human resources policy statement. It's a stated goal, but also you build the infrastructure to recruit, but you build the infrastructure to retain and to advance. So you don't have the situation where you have all these people who identify ethnically and culturally as something else, as non-white, but that they all are shelvers or library assistants and then maybe you have one or two or three librarians [of color] in this organization that has 300 people. But that there is a real practice of identifying and retaining and advancing people of color. And that people put their time, energy, and dollars behind it.

Being the only librarian of color, or one of a few, can be a very isolating experience for a variety of reasons. Alabi's survey of academic librarians on racial microaggressions reinforces these comments on exclusion and isolation of librarians of color.¹⁹ However, diversifying

¹⁹ Alabi, "This Actually Happened," 186-187.

the workforce in terms of numbers alone is not the only solution to this problem. Other work has to happen as well, namely, more white librarians need to step up to the plate and do diversity work. If they are intimidated or feel it's not their place, then they should learn to be an ally without placing the burden on people of color to teach them. The profession needs to think beyond recruiting more people of color to become librarians, and as the last quote mentioned, libraries must build infrastructure to better recruit, retain, and advance people of color within their organizations. What we really need to explore is how to create a more inclusive organizational culture. Furthermore, diversity work should be seen as equal to other professional work—or even more so. The following sections discuss additional issues that women of color librarians face that create uncomfortable, and sometimes hostile, work environments.

B. Perceptions of Competency and Authority

In the workplace, many people of color experience having issues with coworkers or patrons questioning their competence and authority. Research that examines racial microaggressions in academic librarianship reveals that many academic librarians of color are more likely to face microaggressions in the workplace and are treated differently than their white coworkers.²⁰ Faculty of color are also more likely to have their intelligence, qualifications, and authority questioned which can have negative effects over time on one's confidence and mental health.²¹ Not surprisingly, these experiences came up frequently during our interviews with women of color librarians. One participant said, "As an early-career librarian and someone who is seen as lesser, I feel like I have to work harder to be like 'I'm a professional'...as the saying goes 'you work twice as hard to get half as far.' Like I have to work so much harder just to stand on the same playing field as other people." For some librarians who were early career, they attributed the perceived incompetency due to looking young, being a person of color, or a being a woman. The insidious nature of condescension that these women faced is sometimes not

20 Alabi, "Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries," 52.

21 Alabi, "'This Actually Happened,' 181; Derald Wing Sue et al, "Racial Dialogues: Challenges Faculty of Color Face in the Classroom," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2011): 331-40.

overtly offensive, which makes it hard to pinpoint what exactly made those interactions uncomfortable.

Many librarians mentioned that some patrons were not always confident in the answers that were given to them, making the librarian feel as though they were not being perceived as a trained professional. As a result of this perception that patrons may not be satisfied with the answers given by the librarians, some felt like they needed to be extremely thorough in helping their patrons.

Sustaining a level of high performance for long periods of time can be difficult, especially if one observes that other coworkers are not expected to perform at the same level of rigor and professionalism. Several of the women we spoke to acknowledged that they had to hold themselves to a higher standard because they knew they would be more susceptible to being perceived as less competent than their counterparts.

These feelings of not being treated as someone with the training and authority to be a librarian were not limited to just public service interactions in a space like the reference desk. For some, this extended into the classroom. A number of our interviewees who also teach in their libraries remarked that there are some similarities between providing research assistance one-on-one, and teaching to a larger group, but the dynamic of working with a group does change things, including more interaction with faculty members or other instructors. As one librarian remarked that “it felt a lot more stressful than a reference interaction, which was more one-on-one, and instead in an instructional session where I felt like really it is all eyes on you and you’re not just teaching to just one person, you are teaching to an entire room of students.”

The quotes below illustrate the experiences of how these women of color librarians’ ability and competence have been perceived in the workplace.

Teaching

I’ve had times when I’m setting up and prepping, and people sort of look at me like who is this and then they see me with all the documents and things so once they realize I’m the librarian, then some of them still like look at me funny. I don’t know, I think it depends on how that session goes to whether or not they trust me. It’s like I have to earn it by the end, or if they still aren’t convinced at the end, in the workshops I have an hour or so to teach and to I guess

win students over and show them that I'm competent and teach them something new.

Even when I walk into the room to deliver an instruction session, some people have mistaken me for a student aide. It's like no, no, I'm your instructor for the day—I'm your librarian. Sometimes that can be a challenge to navigate, because not only am I navigating blackness and perceived stereotypes and expectations that you have of black folks in general, or preconceived notions you might have, but I'm also navigating the idea that I'm a young black woman in this profession. And you read me as a student and they already assume certain levels of intelligence based on race and identity but add age to that and it feels like another mark against me in some folks' view.

Providing Reference Services

I am on the younger side of the demographic...when an older patron is asking me a question, I can feel that they don't necessarily trust my answer or they're skeptical of how I'm going to go about getting the answer.

I feel like not across the board, but sometimes you can just kinda tell the person that you are helping doesn't have a lot of confidence in what you're offering. And so I feel the need to be really, really thorough with my patrons, and to make sure that I follow up, depending on what your question is.

I chalked up some of the responses of people towards me then to me being young, or me being just out of library school, but I think I have a lot of responses now where I realized it might be some kinds of unconscious things coming in—like, my boss there, reference traffic was really low. It was as if she didn't have confidence with my ability to answer reference questions, so if she was nearby she would make a beeline to the desk. It was as if she wanted to make sure or reassure herself of what I was going to say.

Authority and Management

We spoke to several librarians who were in management positions or positions of authority in their workplace. In our conversations, many recounted times when patrons did not believe that they were the person in charge, sometimes asking to see another manager or being disrespectful. For many of the women, this gave them feelings of discomfort, anger, and invalidation. The quotes below illustrate

a couple of librarians' experience, but this sentiment was echoed in several of our interviews.

I've had plenty of patrons who ask the manager to meet, and when I tell them that is me, they are very dissatisfied and say well I need to speak with the man in charge. So I will hear things like that and it's sometimes a double whammy...from some patrons, it's simply youth more than gender, from a couple patrons, it's been some racial issues in a way that I'm not thrilled with.

Also, when people come to the reference desk and they ask for the person in charge, and I say "okay well I'm the librarian here today, I'm the person in charge" and they're like "no, no, no" they think it's another woman who's Caucasian who has the same exact position as me, but in my view, well maybe they think she's in charge because she's white and older, but we have the same position.

Because these interactions are not always explicitly discriminatory, it's hard to pinpoint exactly why someone is not willing to believe that librarian's position of authority, which in turn makes it harder to address. One librarian mentioned that the reference desk was located outside of her boss's office and patrons would often mistake her for a receptionist instead of a professional librarian who was trained to provide research help. When we asked how this made her feel, she replied "I was also very angry because I knew that the only reason that they refused to interact with me or refused to believe that I had qualifications to help them was just based on what they saw before them." Patrons asking to speak to a "real librarian" suggests several things to the person who is working at the desk. It suggests that they are not competent or unable to help that patron, even when they are fully capable of doing so. Within the taxonomy of microaggressions developed by Sue, these kinds of comments are seen as microinsults which "represent subtle snubs, frequently outside the conscious awareness of the perpetrator, but they convey an oftentimes hidden insulting message to the recipient."²² For those on the receiving end of these comments, feelings of frustration, disrespect, and even stress can lead to negative consequences on one's psyche over a prolonged period of time. One has to discern when something is worth speaking

²² Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010): 31.

out against, but many times people end up internalizing these feelings or feel like they must overcompensate for other's misconceptions of their ability to perform well in their jobs.

C. Questions of Personal Identity and Sexual Harassment

As we conducted our interviews, it became more apparent that sexual harassment in the workplace has become normalized and that the woman's body and appearance are up for comment or violation. In several interviews, many women made reference to patron interactions that made them feel uncomfortable. In some instances, this was because they had male patrons who would cross the line and interrogate the librarian's sexuality, gender, and race. This is not particular to women who work in a library, it is a reflection of a larger societal issue; yet the nature of providing public services in a library setting means that one has to have a friendly and approachable demeanor which is either imposed upon the employee through customer service standards in the workplace, or guided by a personal philosophy to perhaps ease any library anxiety. Unfortunately, for many women, this level of friendliness or niceness is misconstrued by patrons as an invitation to comment on the librarian's appearance, to ask personal probing questions that went beyond a reference question, or to ask about the librarian's racial or ethnic background.

In several of the interviews where women mentioned feeling uncomfortable because of sexual harassment, they did not always report the incidents to Human Resources or their supervisors. Unwanted advances towards women in the workplace has become so normalized that it's seen as an inconvenience or frustration but not something that is always taken seriously by those in authoritative positions. As a coping mechanism, some women began to change how they presented themselves at work. One interviewee mentioned that she began to change how she dressed at work so that she would stop receiving comments about her body while at work: "I wear a lot of long cardigans to hide my shape or have my butt covered because I don't want the looks, I don't want the comments on my hips." It is a significant realization that women must pay close attention to how they present themselves in the workplace in order to feel safe, secure, and also respected. The quotes below highlight some of our participants experiences in terms of uncomfortable patron interactions and how they present themselves at work.

Sexual Harassment

Men will presume familiarity and disrespectfulness, commenting on my appearance and sexual overtures.

I feel like guys will ask me for inappropriate things for my reactions so I always usually don't give them a reaction. So for example a guy came up to me and he was like "Hey I want a book on kama sutra," and I was like okay sure, gave him a call number and told him where to find it. And then he was like, "Oh this doesn't freak you out?" And I was like nope. So he goes "Are you into like sexual experimentation?" And I was like, uh nope, not at all.

So there's times when you have to—I have to go to the shelf to show the person where the book is or try to teach them instruction on how to use the library. And they'll just definitely be uncomfortably close and touch me sometimes like on the shoulder and stuff. So for those I end the interaction pretty quickly, like "okay, well there's your book and I'll see you next time." It's never been anything like too—it's things I can handle. I can handle like a pat on the shoulder and stuff like that. But I'm also wondering—I'm like, I don't think you would be doing that for like a male librarian so it can get uncomfortable.

Appearing More Professional

I constantly get asked, "oh do you go to school here, or what are you studying here, or oh can I talk to a librarian" because I think they think I'm a student worker. That's another thing. I don't feel like I'm validated or being taken seriously. So in order to look older I sometimes put more effort into my hair, like when I'm throwing it into a bun, which is what I usually do. I started doing the makeup last year, it's completely new to me and I'm still trying to figure that out. I don't know that it makes a difference, but internally I think that it makes a difference and makes me more confident so I think that might help if I have more confidence in my appearance in looking older. Even wearing my glasses I feel like makes a difference.

I started doing this thing where I wear my hair out as my sort of calling card, but I noticed when I'm trying to do a little bit more professional look, I'll wear my hair back... but I tend to have a little bit more of a professional put-together look where I might wear a little mascara or something like that, but I'm not really, I don't wear a lot of makeup as it is. But I might kind of put it up a notch if I have a big meeting.

Women may feel pressure to present as more feminine or more professional in order to be more accepted by their peers and patrons, and yet also it opens them up to comments about their appearance. As Minh-Ha T. Pham states “Fashion, like so many other things associated primarily with women, may be dismissed as trivial, but it shapes how we’re read by others, especially on the levels of gender, class and race. In turn, how we’re read determines how we are treated, especially in the workforce—whether we are hired, promoted and respected, and how well we are paid.”²³ Even what we as a profession consider as professional does not always account for one’s racial and ethnic background, and in turn centers whiteness and heteronormative values. Galvan writes:

Unpack for a moment what the notion of being ‘put together’ professionally involves: hairstyles, makeup, becoming comfortable in costuming which may or may not be designed for our bodies, voice coaching to eliminate accents and modify tone, time for exercise to appear ‘healthy’, orthopedics to address poor posture, orthodontics and teeth whitening, eye contacts if our lenses distort our appearance, concealing body modifications, and the countless ways marginalized librarians modify gesture, develop behavioral scripts, and otherwise conceal their authentic selves in the interest of survival.²⁴

As we learned in our interviews, many women of color felt pressure to present themselves in ways that conform to white, heteronormative norms, which sometimes felt at odds with their authentic selves in order to appear authoritative, competent, and professional.

In terms of appearance, our interviews emphasized that certain aspects of a woman’s appearance were more questioned than others. Several black women that we spoke to mentioned that the way they wore their hair was often a topic of antagonism. One mentioned a patron who reached over the counter to touch her hair, while complimenting her and asking her about her hair, but never asking for her permission to touch her body. She described it as a dehumanizing

23 Minh-Ha T. Pham, “If the Clothes Fit: A Feminist Takes on Fashion,” *Ms. Magazine*, Fall 2011, <http://www.msmagazine.com/Fall2011/iftheclothesfit.asp>.

24 Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship>.

experience, since she was made to feel like a “circus animal.” In a different situation, the same librarian was pulled into an office to talk to a supervisor who complained about another employee’s hair, which gave the implicit message to the librarian that she needed to be more aware of how she wore her own hair, in the event that her coworker might talk about it behind her back.

Sharing Personal Identity

The concept of appearing professional at work is not limited to only how one dresses or presents, it can also be related to how much personal information a librarian might share with their colleague or with a patron. A couple of the librarians we interviewed mentioned that they were not out about their sexuality at work. One librarian mentioned she must wear many masks at work, and while her coworkers may not have issue with her being queer, she wondered “can I safely perform my queerness here in a way that won’t have people look at me strangely? Can I safely approach these topics?” These issues of perception truly go beyond appearance, and can be tied to issues of personal safety and harassment. Another librarian stated, “I have to sort of play a role that people are comfortable with, which is not really my true personality. So that’s the first thing. But I do think I also just generally have to hide my being queer from customers and from staff, or risk harassment basically. And in fact in the times that people have found out that I am queer, it has led to negative consequences.”

Race/Ethnicity and Appearance

Sometimes I feel like when a reference interview starts to go into more personal stuff, like if I’ve helped the patron and then usually it’s a man, wants to ask me more personal questions. Like it starts to really make me feel uncomfortable. And usually they’re questions about my hair or my ethnic background. I don’t want to, I mean it’s obvious, I look different...

Appearance goes beyond how one dresses at work, and extends to assumptions that people make when looking at someone. Many of our participants dealt with comments about their racial and ethnic identity, which made many of the women feel uncomfortable. A couple of participants mentioned that they sometimes pass for white, and while working at the reference desk, they had to listen to patrons say racist comments. Again, for these librarians, they were put into

an uncomfortable situation where they were forced to decide whether they should say something and get into a conflict, or let it slide. However, by not saying anything, some women felt like they were being complicit in allowing those comments to go unchallenged, which creates internal tension with their self-identity and outward presentation.

Going beyond physical appearance, one librarian mentioned that because of her last name, she has been automatically interviewed for bilingual job positions even though she did not state on her application that she was bilingual nor did she even apply for those positions. There are many assumptions that can be made about one's racial and ethnic identity through not just appearance, but even one's name. The questioning of someone's race or ethnicity Others that individual and relays the implicit message that they do not belong there; and might even suggest that they do not match what the idea of a professional librarian should look like in that patron's mind.

D. Self-care

We did not initially create questions about self-care in our interview guide, but the topic frequently came up organically in our interviews. Promotion and discussion of the subject of self-care in online media has become more prominent in recent years, but it is more than just a trend or buzzword. Self-care can have different meanings and interpretations, so what we mean by self-care is generally “any intentional actions you take to care for your physical, mental and emotional health.”²⁵ We asked every participant if they had ever experienced a patron interaction that made them feel uncomfortable, and all fourteen women had. After hearing those experiences, we often, though not always, followed up and asked how they felt during the interaction and what actions they took to take care of their mental and emotional health. We sometimes asked if their coworkers or institution provided any emotional support because an unsupportive environment also contributes to our participants needing to practice self-care. Self-care is important because repeated incidents of racism,

25 “So What Is ‘Self-Care?’,” *University of Kentucky Student Affairs*, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/VIPCenter/downloads/self%20care%20defined.pdf>.

racial prejudice, and microaggressions have very real effects on mental and physical health.

People who experience racism, microaggressions, and other racial stressors may be at increased risk of mental and physical health effects such as high blood pressure, anxiety, depression, and decreased immune system efficiency.²⁶ To be clear, we are not diagnosing any of our participants with these or claim to have any sort of expertise in psychology or medicine, but we want to emphasize why it is so important to talk about these issues: racism has a very real effect on the lives of those who experience it. It is not just “in your head,” but it affects your everyday life. Psychologist Robert T. Carter has found that “Racism can and does create damage to one’s psyche and personality in the same way that being subjected to community violence, being held captive, or being psychologically tortured can create emotional damage.”²⁷ Practicing self-care means that you have to prioritize yourself, and that may seem as if it is selfish or self-indulgent behavior. Women of color particularly are likely to put themselves last: “When we’re expected to take care of others emotionally and physically, taking time, energy, and resources for ourselves can feel shameful.”²⁸

Here are some responses to our questions about self-care.

Burnout

I find I can burn out a little bit if I don’t get a few breaks here and there, it’s a frontline customer service kind of thing. I’m on the reference desk about 33 of my 38 hours at work every week and we’re very short staffed...I’d say I have less time than others since I have to do some administrative things so it can get very taxing...sometimes I feel that it’s hard for me to mask that I’m very stressed with the amount of work that I have to do, so sometimes I dread people coming to ask a question at the reference desk because it interrupts work that I’m doing, which is very unfortunate because that is definitely not how it should be.

26 Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 97-100.

27 Robert T. Carter, “Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognizing and Assessing Race-Based Traumatic Stress,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 35, no. 1 (2007): 83.

28 Sarah Mirk, “Audre Lorde Thought of Self-Care as an ‘Act of Political Warfare,’” *Bitch Media*, February 18, 2016, <https://bitchmedia.org/article/audre-lorde-thought-self-care-act-political-warfare>.

Right now I'm at the point where I'm kind of getting burnt out by working with the public, but I don't know if that's because the majority of my hours are at the reference desk, where if I had a full-time job where I maybe had more off desk hours and could recharge and go back to the desk and people, I could handle more situations.

General Self-care Strategies

I try to lay out a really positive self-health plan for myself, which means I should be able to take a day if I need to. I should be able to take a day whether I have a cold or if I wake up and it just doesn't feel like today is the day. That doesn't mean I abuse my days, or take more than I need to, it just means that I'm trying to constantly check in with myself and think about health as more than what we traditionally think about it as.

I think I go home and laugh about it and vent. I just—what I guess is, I feel like growing up, my parents always prepared us that this is the world you're gonna live in...a predominantly white world, so you're gonna have to learn how to adjust and get along with peers and these are your coworkers.

Support Systems

I did have a couple of friends at work who also sort of—they had sort of different experiences, but they understood the difficulties that I was going through with some of my colleagues. I would get together with them for dinner or drinks or we would try to have lunch together most days and just sort of sit and vent and kind of decompress together.

If I can, I try to take a break or rope in a co-worker who may be able to support me and help in that situation so maybe take over the reference desk for a little bit.

I have really good staff, where they'll intervene. We have policies where you can't sexually harass people (one of our patron policies). And I have plenty of other library patrons who would just be like, "You know, that's inappropriate or you need to leave"—and I have really good support it's just I guess I just get upset that because I provide customer service or I'm nice, or in the words of an older gentleman "I'm charming," that people feel the need to cross a line.

Many librarians turn to external library networks outside of their institutions for support within the profession. Anantachai, Booker,

Lazzaro, and Parker suggest conferences and professional organization committees as places to find support, “Finding a community of like-minded colleagues validates an individual’s experience, and can help to encourage that individual to move from being a listener to an active contributor to the profession.”²⁹ We have found this beneficial in our own lives but also recognize the privilege in being able to attend library conferences. Many librarians do not receive financial support from their institutions to attend conferences and would have to pay out of pocket in order to have those opportunities. One easy action that institutions can do is to provide more financial support for librarians of color to attend conferences and other professional development opportunities, such as leadership institutes.

While everyone will have different methods and strategies for practicing self-care, a common one is having a strong support network of people who you can vent to, whether these are colleagues, friends, family, or significant others. Even reading through this chapter of other women’s voices may be a form of self-care, validating the knowledge and experiences women of color librarians face on a daily basis. It is important to hear others acknowledge and affirm similar experiences you’ve had, especially when mainstream society wants to deny you that. For us, this project reiterated and reprioritized how truly necessary it is to take time for yourself and to take care of yourself.

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges and hardships that women of color librarians face in the workplace, a large majority of our interviewees replied that they genuinely love working with the public and working in the profession. All of our participants find it rewarding to help others find information and answers to questions they are seeking; this is why they became librarians in the first place.

The findings from our research project demonstrate that systems of oppression—namely racism, sexism, and heterosexism—are deeply entrenched in our society. While wildly blatant forms of racism occur less frequently today than in the past, the pervasiveness of microaggressions in the daily lives of women of color show that oppression looks different

²⁹ Anantachai et al., “Establishing a Communal Network,” 42.

in this modern context. How prejudice expresses itself and is received is dependent on the individual and environment in which they exist. It's not always going to look like an overt display of discrimination, but can be much more subtle and harder to address. When women of color are then placed in the position of serving the public, a unique situation is created where the librarian must balance the value of providing good customer service with the demeaning feelings of receiving racist, sexist, and heterosexist comments on a frequent basis. Does being a good librarian have to be at the expense of oneself?

Going into this project, we had some assumptions about the types of microaggressions that librarians of color face at the reference desk. However, we did not expect the volume and intensity of these microaggressions and the frequency of sexual harassment that women of color librarians experience. During our interviews, there were several times where we felt empathetic to the experiences of the women we spoke to, where it felt like there were no words to really express our empathy. Our profession espouses diversity and inclusion as core values, and yet we need to ask: are libraries even safe spaces for their employees? Libraries as institutions are often complicit in sustaining societal racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity; and in our interviews we learned about the impact that has on women of color who need to work within this realm. While there might not be much that libraries can do about patrons' actions, libraries can certainly decide what patron behavior is appropriate and allowed by implementing institutional guidelines for intervening in inappropriate situations. Reflecting upon our research findings, we realize there is so much more to be done in this area.

The complexities of these issues does not allow for the simple binary of a problem and a solution. What is important is to start talking about the things women of color librarians face—and to a broader audience than just those of us who identify as that. We are left with many questions to continue exploring as we unpack what we've learned in our conversations with these women of color. Join us in taking on these questions. How does structural oppression reproduce itself in spaces that are touted to be egalitarian and democratic? How does one maintain respect in the library when confronted with oppressive treatment or being stereotyped based on one's race, gender, or other social categories? How can library organizations create better work cultures and environments for staff and patrons to exist as their true selves? What would a feminist reference desk look like?

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