

Legislation Without Empathy: Race and Ethnicity in LIS

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Abstract

Most people can agree that libraries are public goods, built upon ideals of egalitarianism and the democratization of information. But can we say that libraries exist without biases? LIS has been unpacking the issue of diversity for decades, particularly its longstanding racial and ethnic biases, while simultaneously trying to shift the focus of diversity issues to include the full spectrum of human identity. This paper takes up the issue of racial and ethnic diversity in LIS, as two single components of the larger issue of diversity, in order to explore the dynamics of race and ethnicity amongst librarians themselves.

Keywords

diversity; power; social responsibility; racism; cultural competency

Introduction

“Libraries alone are not responsible for the dominance of the single set of cultural values that pervades American society, but they do reflect and reproduce it” (Stoffle & Tarin, 1994, p. 46).

The topic of professional myths recently came up in a course on leadership and management that is required as part of my MLIS degree. The list of proposed myths we investigated started off innocuously: the other students and I could all agree that statements such as *leaders are born, not made* were, in fact, myths. While everyone has a different baseline in terms of charisma and confidence, success in leadership can be taught through the development of interpersonal skills and strategies. That is the entire premise of the course, after all.

As we continued down the list of professional myths, an uneasy silence crept over the room as we reached the last point on the slide: *you have to be white, male, old, etc. to be a leader*. It was understood that the myth being indicated was that there was something inherent about whiteness or maleness that made someone a better leader — yet the cognitive dissonance between that notion, which we all knew to be false, and the social reality of privilege (who gets hired, and who decides what being “hireable” means) in our society was palpable.

The complex emotions I felt at the suggestion that libraries had evolved beyond issues of race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, came from many places. On one hand, I am a person of mixed race and multiple ethnicities: I am Italian on my father's side and Arab on my mother's side (although my mother was raised in an Indian household by adoptive parents); I am queer; I am a Muslim. On the other hand, I am a university-educated, cisgender man with light skin and a non-Muslim name, and these things have allowed me to avoid many systemic barriers as well as personal harassment.

I grew up in a world where I was encouraged to live in stealth, to hide the vilified aspects of my identity in favour of ones that were more palatable, especially in terms of my racial and ethnic background. My mother, having faced ridicule for her own name and accent as a young immigrant in Canada, often warned me against disclosing my Arabness or my Muslimness to strangers, and advised me to present myself as Italian (i.e., white) only. With the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in North America that has engendered instances of violence, such as the Chapel Hill shooting in February 2015, I regretfully see the wisdom in her words now.

Thus, in the moment described prior, I felt the desperate need to share the intersections of privilege and discrimination that I embody, but it became difficult to even broach the subject when it was already being painted as a non-issue. In effect, the framing of institutional bias as a "myth" silenced a worthy discussion about systems of oppression in a classroom where certain institutional biases, including able-bodiedness, cis-ness, and socioeconomic class, but particularly race and ethnicity, were self-evident.

For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am singling out racial and ethnic diversity as an unresolved diversity issue in LIS, while acknowledging these as but two components of the multifaceted topic of diversity. Diversity contains the limitless expression of human identity and overlaps with many other marginalized identities as well: "While diversity is often considered as an issue of race and ethnicity, diversity includes a much broader range of concerns in information services and includes all of the various underserved, disadvantaged, and underrepresented populations" (Jaeger, Subramaniam, Jones, & Bertor, 2011, p. 171).

I wholeheartedly agree that centralizing race and ethnicity as the only diversity issue does a disservice to a much larger conversation, as there are many other ways that people have their needs marginalized and ignored. That said, I feel the need to call out the fact that, despite having a prominent role in LIS discourse on diversity and inclusion, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity remains just as uncomfortably salient as it did two decades ago.

Our library schools and our workplaces continue to be dominated by a white majority (Ettarh, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Jaeger et al., 2011; Morales, Knowles, & Bourg, 2014; Samek, 2013). What does it say about the relationship between diversity and the LIS professions when we appear to have stagnated on even our most popular diversity issue? At the very least, I believe part of the answer lies in the disconnect between official policy and our everyday practices.

Librarians of Colour

My own experience serves as a prime example. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class black woman, raised by two highly educated parents who taught me from a young age the importance of playing at whiteness to achieve. I can specifically remember my mother admonishing me to “play the game and do what you want later” throughout my life. I have grown very adept at playing at whiteness. (Hathcock, 2015, para. 14)

Diversity Statistics

Diversity in LIS continues to be one of our most urgent issues, especially in our schools and workplaces: “We’re bringing people from underrepresented identity groups into the profession at [the] same rate they’re leaving” (Hathcock, 2015, para. 2). More than two decades ago, Stoffle and Tarin (1994) recognized this to be true: “The economic base for... our social/educational institutional framework is increasingly dependent upon... many constituencies — [people of colour], women, [the LGBTQ community], [people with disabilities], and others — who are not adequately represented now within these same institutions” (p. 46). And it continues to ring true in the 21st century: “We do not have inclusion, as yet, throughout all levels and aspects of organizational and professional life or in the communities we serve” (Samek, 2013, p. 2).

In particular, reports conducted by the American Library Association (ALA) confirm that racial and ethnic diversity is still an ongoing issue: in 2012, out of the total 118,666 working ALA-credentialed librarians, only 6,160 were African-American and only 3,661 were Latino, although these groups combined made up 40% of the general population at the time (Hastings, 2015, p. 133). In 1990, the numbers were essentially the same: out of the total 120,365 working librarians, 7,432 were African-American and 2,266 were Latino (Hastings, 2015, p. 133).

Thus, we have not seen growth in racial and ethnic diversity in libraries. In fact, we may have seen a relative decrease: “It has been reported that the ratio of librarians of color in the credentialed librarian population has actually dropped to 10 percent in 2000 from 12 percent in 1990” (Kim & Sin, 2008, p. 154). This suggests that librarians have become complacent and allowed for a system which mandates diversity without practicing inclusion, when diversity requires an ongoing set of practices that are actively and continuously implemented: “The creation of a true multicultural organization requires embracing an ongoing process... There is no overnight fix. Change must be systematic, comprehensive, multifaceted, multi-interventionist, and multiyear” (Stoffle & Tarin, 1994, p. 49).

That said, our reliance on statistics to prove the presence or absence of diversity points to another issue in our professional mindset:

Rather than being framed as a shared goal for the common good, diversity is approached as a problem that must be solved, with diverse librarians becoming the objectified pawns deployed to attack the problem... many LIS diversity

initiatives seem to focus primarily on increasing numbers and visibility without paying corresponding attention to... the lived experiences of underrepresented librarians (Hathcock, 2015, para. 7).

Quantitative diversity reports cannot speak to the informal cultural environment of the workplace, nor to its unspoken rules of conduct.

The western library, like all western institutions, has internalized the values of “the dominant white heterosexual male society” that has created it (Stoffle & Tarin, 1994, p. 47). Thus, the success of certain marginalized groups within this system does not necessarily translate to respect and empathy for these groups within the institution, as they are “required to assimilate into the dominant culture... or fail” (Stoffle & Tarin, 1994, p. 47).

Diversity vs. Inclusion

What were Stoffle and Tarin (1994) alluding to when they mentioned the pressure placed on the oppressed to assimilate to the culture of the oppressor? Essentially, they were speaking to the difference between diversity and inclusion, which is not always made clear.

In Canada, we have one policy that encompasses both concepts, although they are fundamentally different from one another. The Canadian Library Association’s Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion (2008) assumes one will naturally produce the other: “Libraries have a responsibility to contribute to a culture that recognizes diversity and fosters social inclusion” (para. 1). Based on this rhetoric, there is no indication that diversity and inclusion might be approached and implemented in different ways.

According to the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), diversity refers to the measurable amount of representation of people from diverse backgrounds within any given institution, while inclusion refers to the systems in place to support such people after they have entered into a new “organization, institution, or social context” (ALISE, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, a policy of diversity is more about filling quotas, while a policy of inclusion, as an aspect of social justice that surpasses representation, is about building mutual respect, cross-cultural communication, and ensuring that all members of an institution have access to the same opportunities (Hastings, 2015; Morales et al., 2014; Samek, 2013).

Moreover, inclusion extends beyond the point after which a person has been hired, where a person may begin to brush up against the “systemic discrimination [that] results from normative practices” (Samek, 2013, p. 2). For this reason, inclusion is often the missing link in our discussions about multiculturalism in LIS and services for marginalized populations: it demands a shift in the workplace culture, as well as continuous time and energy. Empathy cannot be legislated.

In contrast to the Canadian context, the ALA’s (n.d.) diversity policy does go into more depth, including subsections on “Combatting Racism” and “Goals for Inclusive and Culturally Competent Library and Information Services.” The policy acknowledges

libraries as “a microcosm of the larger society,” deeply affected by “institutionalized inequities based on race [that] are embedded into our society,” and that steps must be taken to actively ensure the presence of a diverse workforce and the equal opportunity of career advancement (para. 5). This policy has no publication date, so its effects after introduction cannot be measured. However, as discussed, there has been no change in the relative number of working librarians of colour in decades, and, as we will explore in the next section, we have not seen an increased sense of dedication to upholding inclusive practices across the board in libraries.

Microaggressions

One study suggests that librarians of colour often find themselves to be the targets of microaggressions in the form of invalidation and exclusion, particularly in academic libraries (Alabi, 2015). A racial microaggression is an act of subtle degradation directed towards a person of colour (Alabi, 2014; Ettarh, 2014). While often consisting of brief interactions, microaggressions occur every day, and contribute to the overall dehumanization of marginalized populations.

The topic of racism is not typically discussed in a serious manner amongst librarians: “There is relatively little in the LIS literature that explicitly addresses racism within the profession” (Alabi, 2014, p. 47). This is interesting, considering discussions on racial diversity seem to be dominant: “Racial diversity has traditionally received the most focus in LIS literature related to diversity” (Jaeger et al., 2011, p. 167).

The lack of scholarly material on LIS-specific racism and racial discrimination might be another expression of the power relations amongst librarians based on the relatively low number of working librarians of colour. In an anonymous survey of academic librarians, Alabi (2014) found that white academic librarians tend to dismiss racism almost entirely as a problem in their libraries, while librarians of colour consistently report experiencing and observing racial microaggressions perpetrated by their coworkers.

Similarly, Kumaran and Cai (2015), in their survey of visible minority librarians in Canada, found that, when asked about the specific challenges they face, many participants spoke to a general lack of opportunity, especially when it comes to networking, mentorship, and leadership. In particular, the participants of this survey talked about the subtle stereotyping of their racial and ethnic identities, in relation to how managers perceive their levels of professionalism and experience. Many participants brought up the unwillingness amongst white librarians to see the value of work done in non-Canadian contexts. Kumaran and Cai's (2014) study reveals another instance where the definition of professionalism is rooted in notions of race.

In fact, this demonstrates Alabi's (2015) statement regarding the way in which “the overwhelming Whiteness of librarianship can serve as an environmental microaggression, signalling to people of colour that their presence is neither wanted nor welcomed in the profession” (Alabi, 2015, p. 189). Whiteness, in this sense, refers to a set of ideological practices based on the hegemonic exclusion of people who do not fit the accepted white, middle-class standards of behaviour and appearance (Hathcock,

2015). Whiteness encourages the propagation of microaggressions: because microaggressions are “not usually said with malice, [white] coworkers are more likely to share. And because [these coworkers] don’t see the jocular form of throwaway line as inherently racist, protestations are seen as being ‘overly sensitive’” (Ettarh, 2014, para. 4).

While librarians of colour continue to worry about how expressions of their culture and their physical appearance will affect their success, the white majority of ALA-accredited librarians will not experience race as an influencing factor in their professional lives, and will never intimately know the emotional and psychological impacts that microaggressions have on individuals of racialized experience. As a result, the literature does not accurately reflect the experiences or the challenges of librarians of colour:

The questions of cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and racism within the library profession are often not addressed as an issue of general concern, because librarians want primarily to be identified as skilled information professionals... yet, it is this pursuit of the “pure professional” that has downplayed the rich diversity of cultures in our country, that has hidden and obscured the realities of dysconscious racism, and, therefore, hobbled any movement toward true equality and inclusiveness in our library staffs and collections (Curry, Blandy, & Martin, 1994, p. 2).

How, then, does this distort librarians’ overall professional identity, when we know that one group has the most influence over professional discourse, including what research gets published and what narratives are propagated? How can we start cultivating a workforce with more respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives?

Conclusion

Librarians have the power to act as catalysts for social change. They have the potential to build inclusive library policies, collections and services within a framework of human rights and social justice, reflecting core values of access and intellectual freedom, inclusivity, diversity and equality, and, particularly in the school library context, duty of care and safety. (Schrader, 2009, p. 107)

Cultivating Understanding and Respect

I believe our schools, our LIS programs, are key components to honestly confronting the diversity issues in LIS. The fact that few LIS programs offer courses explicitly dealing with issues of diversity is troubling. Building skills in cultural competency should be standard practice in library schools. Otherwise, our supposed devotion to the ideals of diversity and inclusion as an international community of librarians is merely cosmetic.

Jaeger, Bertot, and Subramanian (2013) claim that “the vast majority of students graduating from LIS programs—nearly 80 percent—do not feel that they had the chance to take even on class related to diversity... Of the courses offered by LIS programs... the vast majority are electives” (p. 244). I am lucky enough to be part of a program that

does offer such a course, but this is a privilege in the landscape of LIS education. That said, the course itself is optional, so it remains a question whether the students taking it are really the ones who would benefit most. Not every student will leave my LIS program with a deep appreciation of the diverse perspectives, needs, and skills of others.

We spend a lot of time discussing the users of our libraries and how we can benefit them, include them, and make them feel welcome. Yet we have not made our own colleagues feel welcome in our libraries. There is a lot of work to do in this regard.

However, I wholeheartedly agree with Hasting's (2015) belief in a brighter future: "Building an environment that is inclusive and diverse is never finished. There are no quotas to fill, no numbers to attain. When everyone has a voice and the opportunity to share their thoughts, it is good" (Hastings, 2015, p. 135).

As topics of social justice continue to gain popularity, I definitely see things moving in the right direction, and I believe librarians are playing an important role. The most important thing to remember is that diversity is not an issue with a finish line; it is, instead, a continuous respectful dialogue that requires our ongoing attention. It is not a myth; it is constant, it is present tense, and it is vital.

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