

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

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This poster shares findings from our research study on the lived experiences of women of color librarians working in public services. We used a feminist interview approach to focus on voices that have traditionally been overlooked and devalued in LIS literature. To read more, look out for our chapter in the forthcoming book *The Feminist Reference Desk* in 2017.

Labor

"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."

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. 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. 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.

Perceptions of Competence & Authority

"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."

Several of our participants experienced having issues with coworkers or patrons questioning their competence and authority. 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.

Questions of Personal Identity & Sexual Harassment

"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..."

It became apparent in our interviews that sexual harassment in the workplace has become normalized and that a woman's body and appearance are up for comment or violation. Participants discussed patron interactions that made them feel uncomfortable due to male patrons crossing the line and interrogating the librarian's sexuality, gender, and race. The nature of providing public services in a library means that one has to seem friendly and approachable, which in turn can be misconstrued by patrons as an invitation to comment on the librarian's appearance or racial and ethnic background.

Self-care

"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."

Self-care is important because repeated incidents of racism, racial prejudice, and microaggressions have very real effects on mental and physical health. Practicing self-care means that you have to prioritize yourself, and that may seem as if it is selfish or self-indulgent behavior. Many librarians turn to external library networks outside of their institutions for support. One easy action that institutions can do is to provide more financial support for librarians of color to attend conferences and other networking opportunities.



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