LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS OF COLOR

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When you walk into a library, the librarian you see behind the desk will likely be a White woman.¹ This is despite decades of efforts to change the demographics of the library profession, including recruitment of library science students from underrepresented communities, residency programs for recent graduates, mentorship initiatives, and support for professional development.² In 1986, a groundbreaking report titled “Equity at Issue” from the American Library Association (ALA) on the state of racial equity within the library profession noted that librarians were 88.5% White.³ A little over a decade later, the association founded the Spectrum Scholarship Program, which was designed to increase the proportion of librarians from communities of color through scholarships for library science education and leadership development programs.⁴ Since that time, over $1.2 million has been awarded to over 1,200 recipients, yet the proportion of librarians of color has barely changed. According to the Current Population Survey in 2022, 86% of librarians identify as White,⁵ representing a 2.5% increase in librarians of color since 1986. This relatively small change in representation since the release of “Equity at Issue” is all the more noteworthy given the increased share of people of color in the United States in the last 35 years.⁶ In other words, Whites have increased their proportional share of representation within the library profession, maintaining that level of prominence despite the changes in the larger U.S. society. This is despite the fact that the proportion of students of color within library and information science programs has increased from 6.79% in 1985 to 17.4% in 2018,⁷ so while more graduates of color have been produced, they are either not finding jobs as librarians or are leaving the profession faster than they can be replaced.

Though the ALA has made diversifying the profession a stated goal since the “Equity at Issue” report and recently elevated this goal to an association-level strategic direction,⁸ the lack of meaningful demographic changes within the profession demonstrates that the current approaches to recruitment and retention have not been effective. In order to have a profession that more closely reflects the communities it serves, librarianship must take a new approach to diversifying the profession.

The majority of studies regarding the participation of underrepresented communities in librarianship have focused on recruitment, with very few examining retention.⁹ Recruitment programs contribute just enough new graduates to maintain the current level of representation of librarians of color, who are leaving in greater numbers than can be accounted for by retirement and attrition when compared to White librarians.¹⁰ This raises the question of what is causing academic librarians of color to leave the profession.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of my dissertation research was to examine the experiences of academic librarians of color with a goal of identifying contributing factors toward their decision to remain in or leave the profession. In so doing, I wanted to identify best practices for retention of academic

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When diversity is framed as a problem of not having enough people of a certain background or demographic, academic librarians of color become the visible representation of success or failure by virtue of their presence or absence, enabling institutions to sidestep the underlying structural issues that make librarianship a hostile place for librarians of color. If the organizational climate and culture of an academic library is unwelcoming to librarians of color, simply adding more of them will not make the library a more welcoming place. This focus on numbers rather than understanding how the lived experience of academic librarians of color impacts their decisions to leave or stay in the profession may explain why attrition has negated any improvements in representation based on recruitment efforts.

Organizational Climate and Culture

Academic librarians of color experience isolation, discrimination, and cultural taxation. A 2017 survey of women librarians of color found that less than half of respondents were satisfied with the organizational climate of both their library and larger institution. In a 2000 study, more than a third of the Black female academic librarians surveyed reported feeling isolated within the library and the larger institution, though this sense of isolation did not negatively impact job satisfaction. Additionally, the majority of Black female academic librarians reported experiencing race-based discrimination in the workplace. This conforms with the findings of another study of Black librarians from libraries of all types in which a majority of respondents reported experiencing racial discrimination in their libraries, though they felt that their careers had not been negatively impacted by such discrimination. A decade later, almost half of respondents to a survey of tenure-track academic librarians of color reported having to deal with both implicit and explicit racism at some point in their careers, demonstrating the persistence of the experience over time. Finally, academic librarians of color also experience cultural taxation through expectations regarding service and research agendas.

Experiences with Microaggressions

Academic librarians of color regularly experience microaggressions. In a study of microaggressions in academic libraries, academic librarians of color were significantly more likely to both experience and observe racial microaggressions as compared to their White colleagues. Examples of microaggressions experienced by academic librarians of color include being asked by library users to “get the librarian,” being ignored in favor of White colleagues, even when it is clear that the White colleague is not a librarian, or being told that they do not look like a librarian. Microaggressions were also named as one of the top contributors to low morale among academic librarians of color, along with administrative incompetence, personality conflicts, and manipulation of the system by colleagues.

Academic librarians of color also regularly experience tone policing, or being told that they are too emotional, negative, or shrill in professional settings. A focus on anti-emotionalism as a hallmark of professionalism in librarianship is evidence of cultural bias against librarians of color, as they often come from cultures where emotional investment is considered appropriate. Academic librarians of color who do not suppress their emotions in deference to White culture are labeled as difficult, combative, or argumentative, which can hamper their ability to progress in their careers, whether that progression is towards tenure, promotion, or advancement to administration. The concept of professionalism itself is called into question by academic librarians of color for
its focus on the work of librarianship without questioning how the work perpetuates the structures that continue to oppress marginalized communities. Awareness of how academic librarians of color experience their profession is essential to beginning to understand how the structures of the profession must change in order for it to become a truly inclusive place. In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of the larger study’s methodology and my own positionality before turning to the participants’ experiences with microaggressions.

METHODOLOGY

Ten librarians of color, including six recruited through the ALA Spectrum Scholarship program, each participated in a series of three interviews. They were equally split between those who were still academic librarians and those who had left for another branch of librarianship or another career altogether. Interview data were coded to identify themes from the emerging narratives, while the counternarratives developed through narrative inquiry are being shared to disrupt the prevailing narrative of whiteness in academic librarianship. Narrative inquiry is an approach to understanding aspects of the human experience through the stories of the people who lived it. I drew on the assumptions of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to design my study, co-construct the participants’ counternarratives, and make sense of the findings. CRT grew out of legal studies, is based on the premise that law and legal institutions are inherently racist, and has been extended to include the premise that, in general, all structures and institutions are racist, not just legal institutions. While many themes emerged from the interviews and counternarratives, this paper is focused on the organizational climate as experienced through microaggressions.

EXPERIENCE WITH MICROAGGRESSIONS

A consistent element of the participants’ experience as academic librarians of color is dealing with microaggressions, though not all had the same familiarity with the term or had just recently learned about them. Helen (Asian-Pacific Islander) has an example that is a good introduction to the concept.

I think one of the characteristics of microaggressions sometimes is that there’s something wrong and you can’t put your finger on it. And it’s hard to know sometimes for me, because I started out… I went into management at such a young age and that I appear to be even younger than I am too. So that’s been an issue. And then almost with female, just my multitude of identities. And then I’m also Asian American. So some of my earlier microaggressions, I would say when I first became a manager was just people commenting on my physical appearance. Like you are way too young to be a dean. My dean mentor would always evaluate my outfits and tell me whether or not I was dressed well. She told me I needed to step up and dress more professionally and literally would tell me I really like that dress—this is an older White woman who would do that. It’s kind of the same gender things where men are telling you to smile. And throughout my life, I’ve been asked, “Where are you from?” Even a neighbor. I live in a predominantly White neighborhood. My neighbor this week even asked me, “What’s your nationality?” to which I responded, “American. I was born in America and that’s why my passport says.”

Thomas (Hispanic) had a similar experience with his university’s president that falls squarely into the category of microaggressions about someone’s background.

I love telling this story. I met the president. He was like, “Well, where are your parents from?” I said, “Oh, they’re from New Mexico.” “No, where are they originally from?” “They’re from New Mexico.” “No, what country are they originally from?” “This country. They’re from this country.” He kept going on and on, where were they from? I guess he and his wife had a maid, or they knew someone from Guatemala who had the same last name as me. They figured I was from Guatemala, and I’m like, “No, I’m from this country.”
Being questioned about their origins is a common theme for these participants. Anne had not heard of microaggressions before our conversation, but once I explained the concept, she had an example to share related to when people ask her about her American Indian heritage.

Yeah, actually I do get that quite often from people and they want to know exactly what my blood quantum is. It's none of their business and also, blood quantum is stupid anyway, because you can have someone who's a hundred percent American Indian, and they can't be tribally enrolled because they're so mixed that there's no one tribe that they have enough blood quantum in to be a member. So it's totally an arbitrary thing. It's ridiculous. It has really nothing to do with someone's identity. So that does get a little bit old when people are telling me, “Well, you don't look like you are American Indian.” And then I have to tell them all my father grew up on a reservation and then they sort of look at me and think, “Oh, well, maybe she's half.”

Anne also reflected on the number of times she had to explain why she, who some people assume is White, was involved with or in charge of diversity initiatives, realizing that this was a form of microaggression. Kristen (Mixed Race/Native) has also had this exact experience.

Because I'm very light-skinned and can pass as White, I also get a lot of comments about, why are you the one leading? It's much easier for me... and it is, don't get me wrong, it is easier for me. I totally own that this gives me an advantage, but it never feels good for people to also say... because it's the assumption that, oh, you only got this because you're light-skinned. I'm sure that had something to do with it, but I also do this work, and I work really hard, and I also am qualified to do things. So, I think for a lot of mixed-race people, that can be a really uncomfortable place, and it took me a long time to not resent that and to just own it and to kind of see, you're absolutely right, yeah, I get through life in a lot of ways because unless you grew up around Indians... like some people never see it, I can very much pass for White.

Not only does Kristen experience microaggressions for being perceived as White, she also had numerous examples of microaggressions related to her Native identity.

I would say that two microaggressions that I get to this day are, one: people find that I'm Native and they have to tell me about a Native person that they met or that they've been to a reservation or they have some connection that they have to go out of their way to tell me about and it always feels like they're wanting me to give them a “Great, good for you, I'm so happy that you're doing that.” It's awkward. The other is that people have in my life said to me, “You must be so proud of all of your success as a Native, coming from where you came from, like growing up on a reservation.” That's always very loaded because I'm like, that's... Yeah, I never know what to say to that one and it still stumps me and it makes me very mad.

Kristen's reaction to the second example of microaggression is especially complicated, as it is rooted in an experience she had when she was finishing high school.

Oh, I'm going to get emotional—sorry. I had a tribal government teacher and when I was leaving, and going off to college, he said, “Go out, be successful, be really proud of yourself in everything you accomplish because the rest of the world is going to assume that you won't accomplish anything, because it's who you are, and where you're from.” [Crying.] Sorry. So, when that happens, his voice is in my head every time, this assumption that, wow, you... and I did, I overcame things. But also, I don't like that people equate that with my work.

Like the well-meaning but ignorant remarks and assumptions about Kristen's Native heritage, this example...
demonstrates the kind of long-term pain that can be caused by microaggressions and how the trauma can build over time.

Jennifer (Biracial/Half Black, Half El Salvadorian) developed her awareness of microaggressions more recently than some of the other participants, and when she learned about them for the first time, it made her rethink a few past interactions, including some with a friend and former colleague.

I have a very good colleague of mine who I used to work with. He’s a good friend, but he says things that I did not realize they were microaggressions until I went to a panel during my Spectrum institute about microaggressions. I’m just like, oh my gosh. This guy does microaggressions all of the time, because he just says things, because I got a Spectrum scholarship and he’s just like, “Man, you guys are lucky. I can’t find any scholarship. I can’t find any scholarships or financial aid.” He’s just like, “It’s so hard.” I’m like, “well, I’m really sorry that all of the straight, White male scholarships were taken. It must be so difficult for you that you have to pay for school, as I am swimming in tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt.”

It was shortly after that training session through the Spectrum program where Jennifer had a situation with her supervisor, who chided her for not paying attention to what a Black student who eventually needed some technical assistance was doing.

I’m not going to be monitoring what a student is doing, especially one of our Black students, because that is not right. That will be very offensive to them. When I explained that, she said, “Oh, I didn’t think about it that way.” It’s kind of the same thing if you’re at a retail store and there’s somebody that works there or a manager that’s following around somebody of color. Checking if they need anything but kind of always hovering. I’m not going to do that. Honestly, I kind of think if they want my help, they’ll ask for it. I’m not going to be like a helicopter just watching over them.

When considering other issues in the workplace, Jennifer believes the conflict stems from the power dynamic with her supervisor, who does not like it when Jennifer has ideas of her own or gets involved with activities outside of the library. Still, the fact that her supervisor is a White woman always leaves the door open to race as a possible factor.

Glenda (Black), Ella (Latina), and Claire (Biracial) all had examples of microaggressions where it was assumed that they could not possibly be the professional in the situation. For Glenda, she had students who would ask her a question at the reference desk, assuming that they did not just ignore her, then ask her colleague the same question to confirm what Glenda told them. Ella, who did not recall these kinds of experiences when she worked at a public library, gets mistaken for a student on her university campus because the assumption is that she could not be a member of the library faculty. Claire also described microaggressions related to her youthful appearance and said that most microaggressions directed towards her were related to the perception of how she does not look Asian enough to be a person of color.

Thomas, having spent more time in the field than most of the other participants, had numerous examples of microaggressions to share, ranging from being told how “articulate” he was during interviews to never being addressed as Doctor despite having a doctorate. He characterized the latter as a microdismissal, a concept about which he recently learned and described as having accomplishments dismissed because he is a person of color.

Reginald (Black), who attended and now works at an HBCU, has not had the same experience with microaggressions as the participants who work at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). When there are conflicts at work, race is not the first thing that comes to his mind as a contributing factor. He attended a PWI for graduate school and recalled one incident, but even this one was questionable for him as to whether it was a microaggression.

When I was at [my graduate school], me and my roommate, we were having a hard time finding jobs and things like that. So we sat down with the dean of students at the time, and she was looking over our resumes and our references, and trying to get a sense of what the issue could
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be. She was looking at our references, and she was shocked that we knew [a prominent Black librarian] and a couple of other people, and she had made a comment like, “How do you guys know these guys and so on and so forth?” And I didn’t think anything of it, she was just asking a legitimate question. And my roommate felt that it was offensive in the tone, I guess, or how she said it. So I didn’t think anything of it. I was just like, she was just legitimately asking. So that was one incident where he felt that was a microaggression. Nothing came of it. He wanted to talk to somebody about it, but that was the sum total that I can recall.

This example demonstrates the slippery nature of some microaggressions, as they can be interpreted differently depending on someone’s perspective.

Finally, microaggressions are not limited to the academic world. When Tamarr (Black) was in a corporate leadership program and attending related networking events, the White participants would be praised for being selected for the program while Tamarr and the other participants of color would be asked how they managed to qualify for such an elite program. The unequal treatment did not stop there.

I used to work for [a library vendor] and speak at a lot of conferences, and so I was a director and had a small team under me. And one of the things that happened pretty consistently was that I was the only Black director in the room, and everybody would always call me by my name, and all the other directors will be called by their title. And so I had got to a point where one time I got fed up with this guy doing it specifically, and then it became this thing where I said after he introduced a few other people as Director this, Director that, and he was like, “We got Tamarr coming up.” I walked up to the stage and was just like, “Yeah, well, my name is, Director Tamarr Jones. I know that such and such tends to forget that, but no worries.” And he turned bright red and from there on out, he ended up just calling me by my title or calling everybody by their names. But it’s one of those things that you try and let it pass until you notice that it’s being intentionally done and then kind of go from there.

In addition to the microaggressions about his position, Tamarr has also received some unwelcome suggestions on how to pronounce his own name. This topic came up when I noticed that he was not using his full name on his Zoom account, so I asked him why.

So when I was more of a solutions engineer, I would take the time to make sure that everybody can articulate my name correctly. But now, in sales, time is my most precious commodity, so if I spent five minutes more or less getting you to articulate my name the right way, then it’s five minutes I don’t have any more. Or on a 30-minute call where no one messes up TJ, and it’s like, “Hey TJ, nice to meet you.” And we’re off to the races. So I had my stint where I tried it, but I would definitely consider it a microaggression, because there is a lot of people trying to correct me on how to say my name kind of thing.

From not taking the time to learn someone’s name to backhanded compliments about being successful despite your background, microaggressions continue to be a problem for academic librarians of color, reminding them that they are outsiders in a system that was designed for White people and continues that favoritism through structures that perpetuate the racism upon which our country was founded.

**DISCUSSION**

Of the multiple recommendations that arose from this research study, the two that are most pertinent to addressing the issues of microaggressions are changing the way we talk about race in our workplaces and how we engage with the topic of race in library and information science (LIS) programs.
Talk About Race

Whether it is out of fear, reluctance, discomfort, or actual racism that we avoid the topic of race at work, we need to change our behaviors and talk about the impact of race in our libraries, institution, and profession. I recommend that I and my White colleagues need to be explicit about our desire for people of color to stay in the profession, and we need to work with them to create solutions, not just do what we think is best. I also recommend that I and my White colleagues address our White fragility so that we can have open and honest conversations with our colleagues of color about the problems they face and our contributions to those problems. Speaking to my White colleagues, it is important to know that our colleagues of color have been waiting to have these conversations with us. The longer we wait to have them, the more likely our colleagues of color are to leave. As different people have different approaches to communication, a variety of dialogue options should be provided, including small groups, conversation partners, online communities, and town hall-style sessions, all professionally facilitated by people with expertise in supporting conversations about race.

I recommend that academic libraries be intentional and transparent about whatever retention efforts are in place, whether it is mentoring programs as discussed above or other initiatives that are designed to encourage librarians of color to stay in the profession. The aforementioned reluctance to discuss race in professional settings precludes discussion of the issues leading people of color away from academic librarianship, so being willing and able to talk about race signals a commitment to change.

Change LIS Education

The 2015 Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies’ language regarding diversity is not directed at the profession itself, but how the profession should serve the community: “Responds to the needs of a diverse and global society, including the needs of underserved groups.” Though there are standards related to the recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty, there are no standards related to diversity within the profession. Based on my discussions with the participants, I recommend that students be required to learn about the importance of promoting DEI within the profession. Specific recommendations include learning about the historical and current demographics of the field, studying efforts to diversify the field and why they have not worked, and examining the barriers to equity and inclusion caused by the centering of whiteness in the profession.

Moreover, in light of the observation of Brown et al. that students are not exposed to frameworks like CRT that would help them understand what needs to be changed within the field, I recommend that students be grounded in a justice-oriented approach to librarianship and given the tools to identify and dismantle oppressive structures within the profession. As part of introductory courses in LIS programs, students should learn about CRT and other theoretical frameworks like critical librarianship (“critlib”) that position the field within the structures that shaped it and question the ideologies that inform the field’s values and assumptions. Tools such as a rubric for examining policies and practices through a CRT or critlib lens by asking questions about the underlying beliefs represented in a policy and for identifying what elements of whiteness are represented in existing policy language could be used in class assignments that involve policy analysis.

Additionally, there are no standards related to the history of libraries or librarianship as a required part of LIS curricula, so students may not have the opportunity to learn about ALA’s complicity in supporting the segregated libraries of the South well into the 1960s. Therefore, I recommend that students learn about all aspects of the history of librarianship, including how the racism, sexism, and other -isms prevalent in society at the profession’s formation continue to impact how the profession treats its members today.

Finally, a study on the diversity of students in LIS programs over the last three decades found that students of color are not graduating at the same rate as White students, indicating the need for more targeted retention efforts within LIS programs. I recommend the development of retention programs that are based on asking students of color what they need and then giving it to them.

Microaggressions are but one factor that impact the experience of academic librarians of color. While it may seem daunting to address the root causes of microaggressions, it is just part of the work that the library profession must undertake in order to become truly inclusive.
NOTES


19. Anantachai and Chesley, “Burden of Care.”


23. Brown et al., “We Here.”


26. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.


29. As participants were allowed to self-describe their race/ethnicity, consistent terms are not used when identifying participants. Their self-described identity will be listed parenthetically after the first instance of their name.


31. Brown et al., “We Here.”


34. Yoon and McCook, “Diversity of LIS School Students.”