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**Challenges to Diversity and Inclusion for American Librarians of Color: Experiencing Uniqueness and Difference**

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**Introduction and Research Questions**

In order to create an inclusive understanding of reference and information services (RIS) work from the practitioner perspective, the authors conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of eight librarians of color in the United States of America (VanScoy & Bright, 2017). The first aim for this study was to understand the experience of RIS for professionals whose voices have not been heard. Five themes of the experience of RIS for librarians of color emerged from the data:

* uniqueness and difference
* broad range of professional skills
* messiness and beauty of the human interaction
* working in a web of outside forces
* learning growth and change

The second aim of the study was to explore whether and how these professionals’ experience of difference affects their RIS practice. The findings demonstrate that the participants’ ethnic identities did affect their experience. However, in reporting the study findings, details about the ways in which this ethnic identity affects the experience of RIS were not explored in depth. The purpose of this paper is to share previously unreported findings and allow the voices of the librarians of color to be clearly heard.

**Literature Review**

While the job expectations for minority librarians are no different than those of their majority counterparts, research on the experiences of minority librarians has shown that their experiences are different and should be studied (Damasco & Hodges, 2012; Olivas & Ma, 2009). Reviewing research on the experiences and attitudes of librarians indicates that racial or ethnic demographic information of participants is either not collected or not reported in the final report. Most research on minority librarians has focused on two distinct areas: recruitment/retention (e.g., Neely & Peterson, 2007; Howland, 1999; Bonnette, 2004) and leadership (e.g., Alire, 2001; Johnson, 2007). Winston (2008) has criticized the research in this area as overemphasizing demographic trends, lacking in original research, and focusing too narrowly on academic research libraries.

**Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the participants’ experience of reference and information services work (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). IPA is a phenomenological approach that is differentiated by its attempt to identify differences, as well as commonalities of experience. Although IPA studies are generally not guided by a particular theory at the outset -- existing theory being introduced at the interpretation phase -- in this study, critical race theory influenced study design (see Parker & Lynn, 2002). Assumptions from critical race theory that are embedded in the project design include the assertion that race affects the experience of RIS for librarians of color and that their voices provide critical contributions to an understanding of RIS.

The eight participants included four women and four men. The participants self-identified as African-American, Asian, and Latinx, and some offered multiple identities. Participants were employed in a number of environments including academic research libraries, community college libraries, public libraries, and school libraries in the United States.

Following IPA procedures, the participants were interviewed about their experience providing RIS and their experience as librarians of color providing RIS. Each participant’s interview data was transcribed and analyzed to identify themes in their experience of RIS. The analysis was done using a three-stage process characteristic of IPA analysis, working from thematic analysis of each individual case to a thematic analysis of the group. Data were analyzed by both researchers, not for purposes of inter-rater reliability which would not be appropriate for this method, but rather to bring both researchers’ perspectives to the interpretation of the data.

**Results**

There were several themes of experience that emerged from the data. A particularly strong one was the overwhelming sense of uniqueness and difference in these participants’ experience of RIS work. This theme was very briefly addressed in an earlier paper, but here this important theme can be explored fully. The terms uniqueness and difference, as used here, have both positive and negative aspects, and is experienced in subtly different ways by this group of participants.

*Effects of ethnic identity on the interaction with the user*

Overall, participants expressed that being a librarian of color affected their experience of RIS. As the findings demonstrate, ethnicity affects how users and colleagues perceived and treated the participants, how participants approached users differently, and the pressures the participants feel on the job.

*Uniqueness: “Only one”*

Participants used such phrases as “unique”, “first of my kind”, and “set-apartness.” In fact, most participants quantified this uniqueness, often stating that they were the “only one” or “one of four”, for example, in their organization with his or her unique characteristics. The specificity with which they tallied themselves and other librarians of color emphasizes their sense of uniqueness.

*Being visible*

Although being the “only one” was a negative emotional experience, participants generally felt that their ethnicity positioned them as beneficial to users. Participants described a unique relationship with users of color, observing that their presence contributed to a more inclusive atmosphere in the library. One participant expressed, “I think there’s a level of work that brown and black librarians do inherently, just by being present, by showing up, being available…”

*Unique relationship with users of color*

Participants felt that being a librarian of color allowed them to relate better with users of color and to serve them better. Their shared ethnicity, or simply shared experience as a person of color, allowed the participants to be more approachable and to communicate better with users of color.

*Added Burden of Being a Librarian of Color*

Participants’ experience of difference also had negative aspects. Many participants talked about the added burden of being a librarian of color, often serving on all diversity-related committees and service initiatives. One area of frustration was the expectation that the participants “represent the entire minority population”.

*Micro-aggressions and discrimination*

In addition, the participants experienced racial micro-aggressions and discrimination as they provided reference service. One participant recounted a narrative, clearly painful, of a user writing a letter of complaint about him. The user assumed the participant was chatting with a friend at the service desk instead of helping her, when in fact, the participant was assisting a user of color. Because the user and the librarian were both African American males, the patron assumed they were friends and that the librarian was ignoring her.

**Discussion**

While the larger study with its five themes demonstrated that librarians of color experience RIS in many similar ways to librarians in general (VanScoy & Bright, 2017), the specific theme of “uniqueness and difference” reveals an additional dimension of experience. This unique experience reinforces the findings of earlier studies that library work for librarians of color is different than that of their majority colleagues (Curry, 1994; Thornton, 2001). Participants were asked to take on duties that focus on their ethnic identity, rather than their information science expertise, such as chairing a diversity committee, or selecting reference materials or providing liaison services in subject areas that reflect their perceived ethnic identity, such as urban literature or Asian studies. In addition, some of the librarians of color recounted narratives of discrimination by users at the reference service point and all recounted moments of questioning whether they had just experienced racism or not.

The findings emphasize the importance of the visibility of librarians of color in the library environment. These findings support research about perceptions of approachability of librarians at the reference desk based on ethnic group (Bonnet & McAlexander, 2012). These participants went beyond approachability, however, claiming that communication, trust, and other aspects of the reference interaction were facilitated by a shared background. Further research is needed to understand how user preference, user perception, and the outcomes of the reference interaction are affected by a shared ethnic identity between user and librarian (VanScoy & Bright, 2016).

An important consideration for practice is the added burden placed on librarians of color that managers and administrators need to acknowledge. Requests to serve on committees or represent their libraries increase the added burden that already exists for librarians of color to serve as role models and to prove their worth as professionals. The micro-agressions and discrimination experienced by participants reinforce the need for diversity policies, as well as creation of a culture of support and inclusion.

**Conclusion**

The results of this small qualitative study are not generalizable to the population of librarians in the United States. In addition, the context of the study is the unique racial context of the United States. However, the results reported in this paper highlight the challenges faced by librarians who represent an underrepresented ethnic group in librarianship. Feelings of isolation and shouldering an addition burden, as well as experiences of micro-aggressions and discrimination, may span global contexts. Sharing findings such as these between cultures may help to bring scholars and librarians together to raise awareness, generate additional questions for research, and moving forward toward a library profession that is diverse and inclusive.

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