

Deconstructing White Culture in Libraries



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Summary

After reviewing research on the pervasive whiteness of library spaces and staff, this work is meant to summarize and acknowledge the impact of white culture on BIPOC library workers, explore what libraries can do to support diversity in their spaces, and how leadership is vital to promoting change in the library.

Diversity in Libraries by the Numbers

- In 2017, the ALA's Member Demographic Survey found that 86.7% of ALA members identified as white.
- According to CARL (2015) less than 1% of Canadian librarians are Indigenous (Schmidt, 2019, 3).
- According to the 8Rs Study, librarians of colour account for 7% of the profession in Canada (Kumaran, M., & Cai, H., 2015, 110).
- In a Statistics Canada survey, 19.1% of Canadians identified as part of a racial minority (Kumaran, M., & Cai, H., 110).

ALA Members by Race or Family Origin <i>% of members self-identifying</i>		
	2014	2017
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.1	1.2
Asian	3.5	3.6
Black or African American	4.3	4.4
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.3	0.2
White	87.1	86.7
Other	3.7	4.0

Impact

- In workplaces that have only one BIPOC staff member it can lead to feelings of tokenism, as well as “isolation and insecurity” for the library worker (Hathcock and Sendaula, 2017, 251).
- BIPOC workers may be subject to microaggressions for not meeting elements of normalized white culture in the workplace including expectations of appearance and behaviours (Brown, Ferretti, Leung, & Méndez-Brady, 2018, 170).
- Bias about who can hold a position of power in the library, including the assumption that BIPOC staff do not hold leadership positions in the library (Espinal, Sutherland, & Roh 2018, 155).
- Because library leadership positions have been historically white, BIPOC workers who earn these positions often have their authority and experience questioned (Hathcock, and Sendaula, 247-248). These notions can lead to less promotions or impact opportunities for BIPOC library workers (Kumaran, and Cai, 117).
- BIPOC library workers face an increased risk of burn out because of stressful work environments and the expectation they should do additional work like participating on diversity initiatives or panels (Schmidt, 2019 ,4).

What We Can Do

- Eliminating performative actions by library organizations and supporting the creation of diverse spaces that are actively taking steps to decentralize white culture in libraries.
- Organizations can support BIPOC individuals by providing them with opportunities to connect with other BIPOC staff through mentorships, conference attendance, and “cross-institutional collaboration” (Brown, Ferretti, Leung, & Méndez-Brady, 174-175).
- Create diversity training requirements for all staff (Schmidt, 5)
- White colleagues can educate themselves by listening and learning about the experiences of BIPOC library workers, acknowledging their own biases and privilege, intervening when incidents of racism occur in the workplace, and providing support to their colleagues through “micro-affirmations” (Hathcock and Senaula, 253-254).
- Organizations and their leadership can commit to learning and understanding diversity issues in the library, including revising diversity, recruitment, and retention initiatives, as needs change.
- Continue current work to encourage BIPOC individuals to become library workers. Scholars have addressed the issue that BIPOC individuals are less likely to see library work as a career option because they do not see themselves represented in these roles (Hathcock, & Sendaula, 253). In their research, Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh suggested that libraries could incorporate programs that pay existing BIPOC staff to attend library school (157).

Leaders and Supervisors

- Communication is an important tool for supervisors to use to connect with their staff and build trust. Not only does it allow them to communicate vital information to staff, it shows them that supervisors value their ideas and experiences (McNeil, 2017, 187). By establishing a good relationship with your staff, it will encourage them to communicate with you if they have an issue or need additional support.
- Good communication and a safe, inclusive workplace will lead to trust between supervisors and their staff. Supervisors who connect with their staff and actively listen to their ideas and needs, will be better equipped to advocate for them within the organization.
- Supervisors can support retention of BIPOC staff by giving them opportunities for training and promotion, offering access to mentorships, creating an inclusive environment, and ensuring that their work and contributions are recognized.
- Supervisors should organize and support staff training that addresses “unconscious and structural bias” (McNeil, 200).
- Supervisors set the tone for the workplace, so it is important that they lead with intention and help cultivate an inclusive environment that is built on trust, respect, communication, and acceptance.

Conclusion

As library workers and supervisors, it is vital for us to be aware of how whiteness impacts our organizations so we can advocate and change our workplace culture. By continuing to do research and engaging with ongoing conversations surrounding whiteness in libraries, we can work towards dismantling systems of oppression and increase our abilities to provide equitable, diverse, and inclusive workplaces. As library workers and supervisors, we need to continue this conversation, our learning, and the work that libraries have begun to do to decentralize white culture in our organizations.

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