

DisService: Disabled Library Staff and Service Expectations

Kelsey George

Introduction

Only within the last few years have I discovered the language to describe my lived experiences as a disabled woman. Language is vital—it allows us to communicate and, ultimately, connect with others. The absence of language is isolation. Just as receiving diagnoses gave me the names for the giant unknowns that were affecting my life so drastically (POTS and EDS)¹, disability theories have given me a framework to better understand and describe the experience of living with these conditions. Identifying as disabled is as much a political statement as an honest reflection of my experience. It is my way of acknowledging that there is an entire disability community with history, activism, and people who have shared lived experiences due to their disability status. I also want to acknowledge that while identity-first language (e.g. disabled person) may be empowering and respectful for some, it can be offensive or triggering for others who may prefer person-first language (e.g. people with disabilities).² Throughout this

1 Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome and Ehlers Danlos Syndrome III.

2 If you are concerned about what terminology to use when speaking to or about someone, the rule of thumb is to mimic the language they use to describe themselves. If they have never described themselves as disabled or having a disability, do not prescribe that language to them.

chapter, I will be using these terms interchangeably as a reflection of these multiple perspectives.

Over the last eight years I have worked in both academic and public libraries, first in public services and then in technical services. During this time, I have been in varying states of health, and wondered how others in similar situations navigated disclosing disability status, asking for accommodations, and moving forward in their library careers. Until Joanne Oud's recently conducted study of 288 librarians, ten who identified as having a disability, about their experiences working at academic libraries in Canada,³ I had not found another work that focused on the experience of librarians with disabilities on a large scale. This chapter will examine how the current ethos of service negatively affects library workers identifying as disabled or having a disability.

Service has long been held up as a pillar of our profession. While I firmly believe in the idea of libraries serving their communities, this chapter seeks to illustrate how the current ethos of service in librarianship is harmful to all library workers, though particularly disabled library workers, as it dismisses the experiences of minority librarians; is rooted in capitalism; and, disregards personal/professional boundaries. This chapter will utilize personal experience, a survey of ninety-nine library workers identifying as disabled or having disabilities, existing library research, and frameworks from disability studies to deconstruct the effects of a harmful ethos of service in libraries. While the chapter will emphasize how toxic service expectations in libraries hurts disabled workers, it will also address the intersection of disability with other identities such as race, sexual orientation, and gender.

Disability in LIS: A Literature Review

The 2017 American Library Association (ALA) Demographic Study⁴ revealed 2.91% of ALA members identify as having a disability. I argue that this projection of disabled people in our field is low for several reasons: not everyone who may be legally or medically disabled identifies as such,

3 Joanne Oud, "Disability and Equity: Librarians with disabilities face barriers to accessibility and inclusion." *American Libraries*, January 2, 2019, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/01/02/disability-and-equity/>.

4 American Library Association, "Member Demographics Study," American Library Association (January 01, 2017), accessed January 13, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/tools/research/initiatives/membershipsurveys>.

diagnosis requires medical care (frequently over a period of several years—which costs time and money), the demographic study only surveys ALA members (which requires a person to pay an annual membership fee), and disabled people are heavily underemployed. In the 2017 Disability Statistics Annual Report (DASR)⁵, the population of people with disabilities in the U.S. increased from 11.9% to 12.8%. Of this twelve percent, just over half (51%) of people with disabilities were between the “working-age” of 18–64, yet only 35.9% of this age group were employed. In comparison, the employment percentage for people without disabilities ages 18–64 was 76.6%. The 2017 DASR also reported an earnings disparity of over \$10,000 between those two groups.⁶

Heather Hill conducted the most recent content analysis⁷ in 2013 of disability and accessibility in LIS literature. Hill found that the majority of LIS literature on this topic is geared towards serving library users with disabilities, particularly focusing on web accessibility, rather than perceptions of disability or centering the voices of people with disabilities directly. More literature has since been published on the experiences of disabled library workers, particularly in the last several years. Jessica Schomberg⁸ has written on ways we can make library work environments more inclusive⁹ and Oud addresses the systemic workplace barriers for academic librarians with disabilities in Canada.¹⁰ Oud’s article, in particular, brought up how negative perceptions of disability (equating it with lower productivity and more work on the employer’s side to accommodate) impacts a disabled

5 L. Kraus, E. Lauer, R. Coleman, and A. Houtenville, *2017 Disability Statistics Annual Report* (Durham: University of New Hampshire, 2018): 2.

6 Kraus et al., *2017 Disability Statistics Annual Report*: 3.

7 Heather Hill, “Disability and accessibility in the library and information science literature: A content analysis,” *Library & Information Science Research* 35, no. 2 (2013): 137–42.

8 Jessica Schomberg and Wendy Highby are writing a book titled, “Beyond Accommodation: Creating an Inclusive Workplace for Disabled Library Workers”, which looks at creating an inclusive workplace through the lens of critical disability theory that should greatly enhance disability in LIS literature. Publication is forthcoming at the time of this writing and will be published by Library Juice Press.

9 Jessica Schomberg, “Disability at Work: Libraries Built to Exclude,” in *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, ed. Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale (Sacramento, Library Juice Press, 2017): 115–27.

10 Joanne Oud, “Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities,” *College & Research Libraries* 80, No 2 (2019), accessed March 19, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.2.169>.

person's ability to find and keep a job.¹¹ Another one of the major issues Oud's study revealed was that librarians with disabilities are met with a general lack of understanding of disability in the workplace.

Years ago, the first time I mentioned to a coworker that I am disabled, the coworker immediately jumped in to "correct" me: "Oh no, don't say that! You're not disabled."

But I am.

My body has dysautonomia, so it does not properly regulate breathing, digestion, heart rate, circulation, or temperature control. I have bilateral partial paralysis of the diaphragm (which means my breathing is almost always labored) and, thanks to EDS, my joints frequently partially or fully dislocate just from everyday activity. As a result, my conditions limit major life activities—such as walking, eating, showering, etc.—meeting the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) definition of disability.¹² It is important to note that there is no agreed upon definition of disability, and that legal definitions such as those found in the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA),¹³ and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹⁴ are imperfect and precarious. They can be expanded or contracted in order to police protections and economic resources available to people with disabilities.

Theoretical definitions of disability are also imperfect as they are frozen within the time period and social contexts in which they were developed. I do not believe that the social model of disability (which argues that disability is solely a consequence of environmental barriers,¹⁵ such as a ramp missing from a building) or the medical/rehabilitation models (which argue that disability is the same as impairment, a problem

11 Joanne Oud, "Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities," 6–7.

12 United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, "Sec. 12102. Definition of disability," The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Revised ADA Regulations Implementing Title II and Title III (2009), accessed January 13, 2019, <https://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm#12102>.

13 J. W. Madaus, "The History of Disability Services in Higher Education," in *Disability Services and Campus Dynamics*, ed. W.S. Harbour and J.W. Madaus (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 5–15.

14 United Nations General Assembly, Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), accessed January 13, 2019, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>.

15 N. Sherry, "(Post)colonizing Disability," *Wagadu: Journal of Transnational Women's Gender Studies* (2007): 10–22.

located in an individual's mind/body¹⁶ and, therefore, solely an individual's deficit to overcome) adequately address the complexity of the experiences of disabled people. More recently, three theoretical frameworks have come forth: Critical Disability Theory, Social Justice Model, and Disability Justice.

Critical Disability Theory emerged out of postmodern critiques of existing disability theories. It posits that both impairment and environment are important in understanding disability, and provides a framework that allows for the consideration of identity, intersectionality, environment, impairment, and visible and nonvisible representations.¹⁷ The Social Justice Model of disability draws from the overall social justice movement in the United States, borrowing ideas from the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and others. The Social Justice Model focuses predominantly on ableism—discriminatory or abusive conduct towards people based on their physical or cognitive abilities¹⁸—and how ableism functions to “create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, emotional, cognitive, or sensory abilities fall outside the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable.”¹⁹ There are four primary objects of the Social Justice Model: elimination of ableism, redefinition of normal, respect and equity, and development of a positive disability identity.²⁰ The Social Justice Model has its shortfalls, however, namely that, like the social model, it does not account for the role of physical impairments on the everyday life of individuals with disabilities, particularly those who experience chronic illness or pain.²¹

Disability Justice is a theoretical framework of disability similar to Critical Disability Theory, focused explicitly on creating societal (rather than policy) change and exists primarily online. It was conceptualized in

16 C. E. Drum, “Models and Approaches to Disability,” in *Disability and Public Health*, ed. C. E. Drum, G.L. Krahn and H. Bersani Jr. (Washington, DC: American Public Health Association and American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2009): 27–44.

17 Nancy J. Evans, Ellen M. Broido, Kirsten R. Brown, and Autumn K. Wilke, *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017): 68.

18 Paul Harpur, “From Disability to Ability: Changing the Phrasing of the Debate,” *Disability & Society* 27, no. 3 (2010): 325–37.

19 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 71.

20 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 74.

21 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 76.

2005 by a group of queer women of color—Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacy Milbern²²—who are also disabled activists.²³ Disability Justice emphasizes that it is imperative for practice to be rooted in intersectionality,²⁴ recognising that “disability is wrapped up intricately in queerness, in race, in class, in gender, and so on...that liberation, meaning not just the end of oppressive systems, but also the creation and the sustaining of just, equitable and life-giving, loving societies and worlds, has to be collective.”²⁵ Disability Justice varies from the disability rights movement in that its objective is not equality for disabled people or for people with disabilities “to simply join the ranks of the privileged; [but rather] to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them.”²⁶ It requires that “[w]e recognize that ableism is connected, tied up with and mutually dependent on other systems of oppression and that we cannot end ableism without also ending white supremacy, economic exploitation, colonization, and gender oppression...[that we move away from] single-issue analysis, [and] instead build frameworks that can hold the complexities of our lives.”²⁷ This chapter hopes to build upon previous research on accommodations and disability in LIS literature by analyzing our ethos of service through the lens of the Disability Justice framework. In order to do this, I will draw on results from a survey of approximately 100 disabled library workers’ experiences in libraries, address the capitalist origin of this ethos, and look at possible vehicles of change for our current ethos through an embrace of interdependence in LIS culture.

22 Who eventually united with Leroy Moore, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret.

23 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education* : 77.

24 A term coined by Black scholar activist Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe her experiences as a Black woman.

25 Lydia X. Z. Brown, “Disability justice is the art and the practice of honouring the body’: An interview with Lydia X.Z. Brown,” interview by Lani Parker, *Sideways Times*, April 2, 2017.

26 Mia Mingus, “Changing the Framework: Disability Justice.” *Leaving Evidence*, February 12, 2011, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/>

27 Mia Mingus, “Reflection toward practice: Some questions on disability justice,” in *Criptiques*, ed. C. Brown (2014): 110, <https://criptiques.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/crip-final-2.pdf>.

Pinpointing an Ethos of Service

In 2004, the American Library Association (ALA) issued a statement on the core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice: access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility.²⁸ The definition for service originates from the ALA Code of Ethics:²⁹

We provide the highest level of service to all library users. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession.³⁰

Rick Anderson, in his article “Interrogating the American Library Association’s ‘Core Values’ Statement,”³¹ took a hierarchical approach to librarianship’s values. Anderson listed service as one of the fundamental principles of our work alongside *access* and *intellectual freedom*. Anderson essentially characterized service as the heart of librarianship, saying “[e]verything we do is (or should be) built on a foundation of service... [a] library without service is nothing but a collection of documents sitting in a building.”³² Subordinate principles, according to Anderson, such as professionalism (which should characterize our services) and diversity (which improves service quality, helps ensure equitable access, and enhances intellectual freedom) exist almost exclusively in relation to how they support

28 American Library Association, “Core Values of Librarianship,” American Library Association, June 29, 2004, accessed January 13, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.

29 American Library Association, “ALA Code of Ethics,” American Library Association, January 22, 2008, accessed January 13, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

30 American Library Association, “Core Values of Librarianship.”

31 Originally published in 2013 by the *Library Journal’s Academic Newswire*.

32 Rick Anderson, 2016. “Interrogating the American Library Association’s “Core Values” Statement,” in *Libraries, Leadership, and Scholarly Communications* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2016), 61.

the fundamental principles.³³ In her chapter, *Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship*, Higgins asserts that Anderson's interrogation of the "Core Values" is an "Eurocentric, masculinist version of the [librarianship] values...one that seeks to define our values as universal, objective, and neutral rather than embracing the heterogeneity and context of the communities we serve, nor comfortable with defining our service according to our responsibilities to and relationships with our communities."³⁴

Anderson's analysis of the core tenets upholds an ethos of service within librarianship without actually interrogating it. Unlike the ALA's core value description of service—which highlights customer service but also emphasizes professional development and mentorship—Anderson's article gives no direction or definition of service. Instead Anderson refers to service as a concept with which all library workers should already have an inherent understanding. I would argue that this perception of service is fundamentally rooted in vocational awe, a term coined by Fobazi Ettarh, describing "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that results in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred [places], and therefore beyond critique."³⁵ The issue with service ingrained in vocational awe is that tying one's success in the field to their passion, their ability to do-more-with-less, and ultimately their ability to martyr themselves for their work in service to "The Profession" forces workers to choose between their needs and that of their institutions. It inhibits a healthy work environment and disproportionately affects workers with disabilities.

We cannot engage with service as a core professional value without acknowledging that our ethos of service has developed in large part as a result of the gendered nature of our field (as of 2017, 81% of American Library Association members identify as female).³⁶ Melvil Dewey, among

33 Rick Anderson, "Interrogating the American Library Association's "Core Values" Statement," 61–62.

34 Shana Higgins, "Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship," in *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, ed. Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 82.

35 Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

36 American Library Association, "Member Demographics Study," American Library Association, January 01, 2017, accessed January 13, 2019. <http://www.ala.org/tools/research/initiatives/membershipsurveys>.

others, recognized women as more economical workers and intentionally established librarianship as a predominantly white, feminine profession, which it has remained to this day.³⁷ The emphasis on femininity at the end of the 19th century ultimately expanded work traditionally considered to be part of the domestic sphere into librarianship.³⁸ I consider care work and affective labor to be at the foundation of our current ethos of service.³⁹ The lack of recognition of this work as productive labor over time has resulted in a lower paid, lower status workforce. To quote Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, “We must ask ourselves what it means to be in a white, feminized profession and how we can make it a feminist profession—one that actively seeks to elevate women who exist in the margins specifically.”⁴⁰ By applying feminist principles found in Disability Justice, particularly, interdependence and intersectional feminism, into our practice, we will be in a position to better support all marginalized library workers.

You are what you are worth

In her article, “Less is Not More,”⁴¹ Meredith Farkas discusses the relationship between vocational awe and the “more with less” philosophy deeply ingrained in our ethos of service. Farkas asserts that “vocational awe and resilience narratives make library staffers feel less comfortable expressing dissatisfaction with their work and advocating for themselves as well as painting workers who feel burned out or frustrated as failures who couldn’t overcome adversity rather than as people who need support.” Earlier I mentioned how often there is an implicit bias that disabled people are less efficient, and how Oud’s study⁴² revealed a perception that librarians with

37 Shana Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” 70.

38 Lisa Sloniowski, “Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 646.

39 Whether care work/affective labor results in vocational awe or vice versa is somewhat of a chicken and an egg scenario.

40 Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018), 7–8.

41 Meredith Farkas, “Less Is Not More: Rejecting resilience narratives for library workers,” *American Libraries* (November 1, 2017), accessed January 14, 2019, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/11/01/resilience-less-is-not-more/>.

42 Joanne Oud, “Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities,” *College & Research Libraries* 80, no. 2 (2019), accessed March 19, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.2.169>.

disabilities were “trying to get out of work, lazy, whining, etc.” This ties back into the economic and social structures of capitalism: people who are perceived as highly efficient, productive workers are considered the most valuable. Disabled people are inherently considered to be less productive in a capitalist market and therefore deficient, their lack of productivity is regarded as a moral failing.

Under capitalism, there is an underlying narrative that ties an individual’s value to their productivity and independence. Librarianship has a long history with capitalism. In fact, the birth of library science as a field of study and profession directly corresponds with the rise of corporate capitalism in the United States.⁴³ In their article, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past,” authors Gregory and Higgins draw parallels between American business and the widespread adoption of scientific management (organization, standardization, and management of resources) with the gospel of efficiency throughout the development of librarianship. They point out that the success of librarians was couched in terms of efficiency and that library training was designed to create practical, efficient, pragmatic workers who were often underpaid and undervalued women.⁴⁴

The concept of librarian efficiency is very much alive and well in our current ethos of service today. Douglas Crane writes in *Public Libraries Online* that the future belongs to the efficient librarian, one who defines and organizes personal workflow systems, develops personal knowledge management skills, and invokes the power of “next action” thinking.⁴⁵ Efficiency is by no means a negative concept. A worker can definitely improve their efficiency by planning ahead, organizing themselves, and developing routines for their work. Conversations about efficiency in libraries often focus specifically on how library workers can be more efficient in order to make their organization run more smoothly, and great praise is given to those able to do more with less. This shifts the onus of efficiency from the institution to the individual.

43 Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship.” in *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, ed. Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 22.

44 Gregory and Higgins, “In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship,” 25.

45 Douglas Crane, “Efficient Librarianship – A New Path for the Profession,” *Public Libraries Online*, January 23, 2018, accessed January 14, 2019, <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2018/01/efficient-librarianship-a-new-path-for-the-profession/>.

Methodology

The survey was open to all current or recent library workers in the United States over the age of 18 who identify themselves as disabled or as a person with a disability/disabilities or chronic illness. Library workers were defined as any person paid to work in a library. People who were not currently employed or had switched fields, but had worked in a library for at least one year within the last five years, were welcome to participate. I chose to open the survey to people who had worked in libraries recently, but may not be currently working in a library, specifically because disability can cause someone to need to leave a job or drop out of the workforce entirely, and I wanted to include the voices of library workers who have experienced this. To qualify as someone with a disability or as a disabled person, participants must identify as such currently. All disabilities—whether invisible or visible—including physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mental health disabilities, and neurodiversity counted. It does not matter if the disability was recently acquired or if the participant had it since birth; whether it is static; or whether they require adaptive devices.

The main survey questions were designed so that the participant could rate the frequency in which certain interactions may or may not have occurred at their institutions. Some of these questions centered on microaggressions the participant may have experienced. Due to the nature of the questions, I tried to minimize the emotional labor asked of the participants when designing the survey, including allowing participants to skip questions or stop taking the survey at any time. Incomplete surveys were not retained or included in the final report. The survey consisted of questions for background context (work history, library demographics, library position-related questions, personal demographics) and experience (disclosure in the workplace, perception of disability in the workplace, microaggressions, organizational culture, accommodations, and resources). Of the 99 respondents, ~60% were between the ages of 18 and 39. Eighty-five percent of the participants identified as White, ~79% identified as women, ~54.5% identified as heterosexual, and only four participants identified as transgender.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ For a full breakdown of demographic categories, see Tables 1–4.

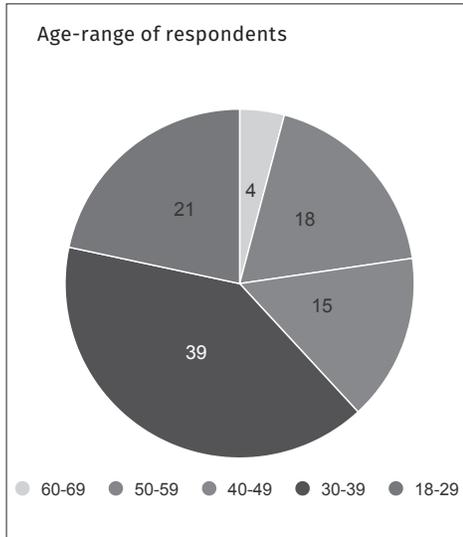


Table 1

Race of respondents

Field	Choice Count
Asian	1
Black/African	3
Hispanic/Latinx	6
Native American	3
Pacific Islander	0
White	85
Prefer not to answer	3
Other	3

Table 2

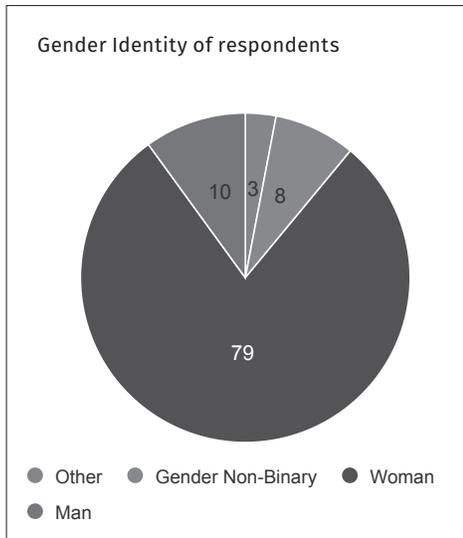


Table 3

Sexual Orientation of respondents

Field	Choice Count
Asexual	6
Bi-sexual	15
Gay	2
Heterosexual	54
Lesbian	4
Pansexual	2
Queer	9
Other	4

Table 4

Disclosure

In Oud’s study of Canadian academic libraries, she found that only half of the librarians interviewed “had disclosed their disability fully to their supervisor and only 30% to their coworkers,” with most participants fearful of requesting accommodations unless they absolutely had to do so. Those who requested accommodations reported facing repercussions, “including being perceived as a whiner or troublemaker, seen as trying to get out of doing work, and threatened with job loss.”⁴⁷ Accommodations meant to make it possible for library workers with disabilities to do their jobs were perceived as requesting “special treatment, unearned privileges, or gaming the system.”⁴⁸ All of these perceptions are deeply tied to the idea that people with invisible disabilities are “faking it.” Yet not all disabilities are readily apparent, and not all disabled staff may be “out” to everyone at their institution. Accommodations, legally, do not need justification outside of HR and the ADA office, and needing accommodations should not affect the ability of library staff to move forward in their careers. However, this is not always the case. Disability “passing”—in which a person may appear to be abled, allows individuals to choose whether to “out” themselves to coworkers or supervisors and can influence whether they ask for accommodations.

Within this survey, 82% of participants reported that they had disclosed their disability to someone at their current institution (~18% during application, ~12% during interview, ~42% after being hired to their supervisor only, and ~15% formally disclosed after being hired to Human Resources and/or the ADA office). Participants were also asked whether they were “out”—open or sharing information about some or all of their disability/chronic illness, whether symptoms or diagnoses—to their coworkers. Eighty-five percent of respondents answered affirmatively, that they were out to either a few (~20.7%), some (~18.4%), most (~18.4%), or all coworkers (~27.6%) at their current institution. It’s important to note that not everyone has the privilege of privacy when it comes to choosing whether to disclose information about disability. Use of a mobility device or other assistive technology can reveal information without the need for it to be explicitly stated.

47 Joanne Oud, “Disability and Equity.”

48 Joanne Oud, “Disability and Equity.”

There are many reasons why people with disabilities may decide not to request useful, necessary, or legally-mandated accommodations; some accommodations can be difficult to hide from coworkers and people may choose not to request accommodations to avoid disclosing personal medical information in order to keep their disability status hidden.⁴⁹ This came up in the survey responses, where several participants only disclosed their disability when they absolutely no longer could avoid it in order to receive accommodations. Those who still had not disclosed in their current workplace expressed feelings of not wanting to draw attention to themselves, fear of judgment, fear of disclosure being perceived as an “excuse,” a desire to “pass” as abled, and a general feeling that disclosing would cause them to be treated differently and their work valued differently. I have felt similarly in my own career.

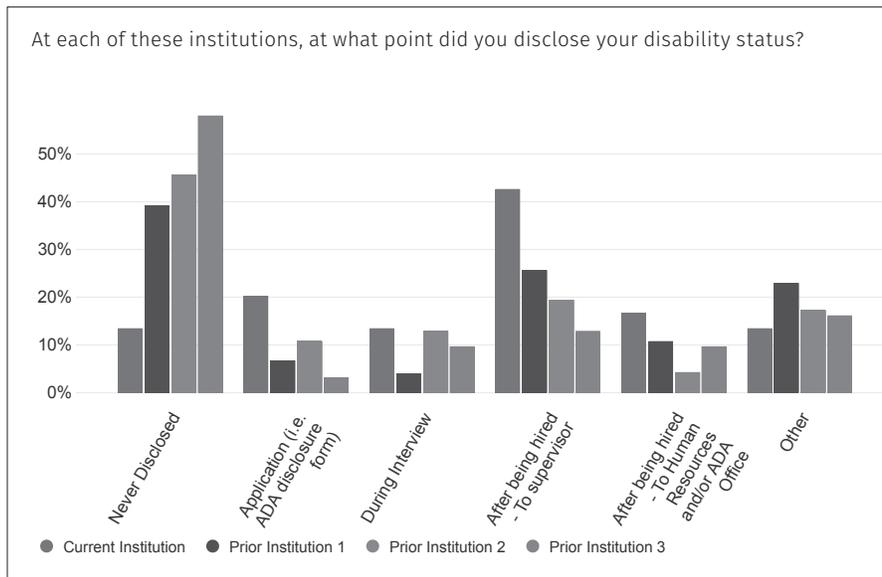


Table 5

Participants who disclosed their disability to either coworkers, supervisors, and/or HR were then asked how often disability was discussed in relation to their ability to perform their job. Of the seventy-six participants who answered the question regarding how often disability came up regarding the participant’s job performance: ~31% reported that conversations about their disability and ability to perform came up rarely, ~40% reported that

⁴⁹ Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 204.

it came up sometimes, and only ~5% reported that it came up often. Approximately 24% reported that it never came up, and no one said it frequently arose. Overall, participants tended to rate these experiences as neither positive nor negative (~37%), or somewhat (~16%) or mostly positive (~32%).⁵⁰ In cases where the conversations came up with supervisors, over half of the seventy-seven responses were that the conversations rarely or never occurred. The distribution of results regarding participants' experiences with these interactions with supervisors when they did occur were as follows: mostly negative (~12.2%), somewhat negative (~17.6%), neither positive nor negative (~31%), somewhat positive (~13.5%), or mostly positive (~25.7%). Though there were fewer overall people who responded that they experienced mostly or somewhat negative conversations regarding their ability to perform, and regarding their ability to take on additional responsibilities—multiple people who chose to elaborate on their experiences gave examples where the underlying thread through their narratives was that their disability presented more work or a “chore” for their coworkers/supervisors/HR to deal with, and as a result they were made to feel like a burden to their organization.

In the survey, I also asked the respondents if they have been asked to perform a task or tasks that would be perilous to them (in this case, cause or make worse a physical condition or trigger an episode). Approximately 53% of respondents have been told to perform a task that would be perilous to them by a supervisor or person in power, 26.73% reported requests by library users, and 37.6% reported being asked by coworkers.

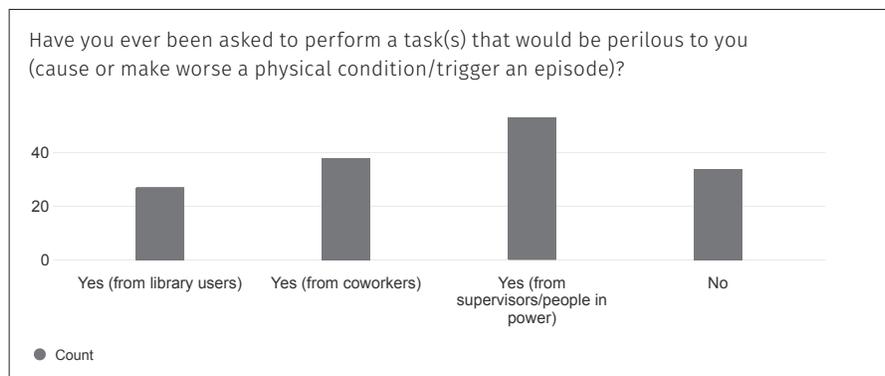


Table 6

⁵⁰ ~4% rated these experiences with coworkers mostly negative, ~11% rated these experiences coworkers somewhat negative.

When asked how comfortable they would feel approaching a supervisor or someone in power about being asked to perform such a task, 20.8% respondents said they would be uncomfortable, 10.9% extremely uncomfortable, and 4.95% would feel unsafe.⁵¹

Implicit Bias and Microaggressions

I questioned whether to include a description of my own disabilities in this book chapter, but decided to do so because the acronyms of my illnesses do not appropriately convey the realities of my life, and I have been told, repeatedly, that I “do not look disabled.”

This is usually phrased as a compliment or an accusation. The assumption that disability looks a certain way is incredibly harmful to those with disabilities and is a form of ableism. It reveals an implicit bias that people with disabilities are somehow deficient or sub-human because their bodies or minds are not “normal,” are only disabled “if they let themselves be,” must be faking if they don’t fit a stereotype of disability, or all of the above.

Implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner—activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control.⁵² Implicit bias is neither positive nor negative, it simply exists. It becomes problematic when the biases we carry are rooted in negative stereotypes and we act upon them. When we do not examine our implicit bias, we uphold “the hierarchy of bodies in our society, reaffirming our system of default bodies and codifying structures of body-based oppression.”⁵³ Not many people in the world are intentionally bigots. Those people absolutely exist, but more often, the prejudice and harm that people of color and other minorities face are in the form of microaggressions. The term microaggression⁵⁴ has been refined by Columbia University psychologist Dr. Derald Wing Sue, to mean “everyday insults, indignities and demeaning

51 7% of respondents said they do not know how they would feel, 22.8% would be comfortable, and 17.8% would be extremely comfortable approaching someone about the issue.

52 “State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2015,” Understanding Implicit Bias, The Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, accessed January 14, 2019, <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>.

53 Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 80.

54 Originally coined by psychiatrist Dr. Chester M. Pierce.

messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them.”⁵⁵ Microaggressions are an expression of implicit bias.

Most of the discussions and studies around microaggressions in librarianship currently are about the way people of color (particularly women of color) are not only experiencing microaggressions⁵⁶ at an alarming level but are also having these experiences minimized⁵⁷ by white, middle-class women who make up the majority of librarianship. The research conducted by Jaena Alabi, Miriam Sweeney, and Nicole Cooke, among others has outlined the way these interactions impact visible minority library workers. Issues of structural inequity that people of color face in librarianship need to be analyzed and addressed. In doing so, we will be addressing issues that also affect other minority groups as well as improving our profession overall.

Those belonging to multiple social identities sometimes have difficulty finding a place where their identities in their entirety will be understood, embraced, and well-represented.⁵⁸ Misconceptions about what it means to be disabled and to have intersecting identities is how people like Lynn Zelvin, blind and Queer, can be refused entry to the Stonewall Inn for having a guide dog.⁵⁹ Entering into a space where one aspect of our identity is welcomed does not always mean that the other aspects will be understood or welcomed as well. It is important to recognize how those with disabilities who also hold additional social identities with less relative power and privilege in society (such as being a person of color, and/or

55 Tori DeAngelis, “Unmasking ‘racial micro aggressions,’” *Monitor on Psychology* 40, no. 2 (2009): 42.

56 Jaena Alabi, “Racial Microaggressions in Academic Libraries: Results of a Survey of Minority and Non-minority Librarians,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 1 (2015): 47–53.

57 Miriam E. Sweeney and Nicole A. Cooke, “You’re So Sensitive! How LIS Professionals Define and Discuss Microaggressions Online,” *The Library Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2018): 375–90.

58 Z. Nicolazzo, “‘It’s a hard line to walk’: black non-binary trans* collegians’ perspectives on passing, realness, and trans*-normativity,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 9 (2016): 1–16.

59 Mary Emily O’Hara, “The Stonewall Inn Refused Entrance to a Blind Person,” them, June 6, 2018, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.them.us/story/stonewall-inn-refused-entrance-to-a-blind-person>.

LGBTQ+ and/or non-cisgender) are often overlooked.⁶⁰ Disability Justice requires us to understand intersectionality and recognize the way different social aspects of life (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, where one lives) affect the experience of someone with disabilities. Not only that, but in our “intersectional analysis, we must locate ourselves, our stories and where our lives live in all of their complexities: privilege, oppression, how we have been harmed and how we have been complicit in harm.”⁶¹ Mia Mingus in her opening keynote, “*Disability Justice*” is *Simply Love*, at the 2018 Disability Intersectionality Summit, said it best:

“It should not be that we have to leave mainstream disability spaces (or even alternative disability spaces) to be able to be our full selves and have whole conversations—about our own lives. It shouldn’t be that we have to leave racial justice and people of color spaces to be able to fully name and examine how abled supremacy and white supremacy work hand-in-hand to oppress and target disabled people of color and all people of color at large. It shouldn’t be that we have to leave queer and feminist spaces to be able to talk about how gender oppression and ableism have deeply intertwined roots. And why it is just as important to abolish the gender binary, as it is to abolish abled supremacy.”⁶²

Microaggressions can seem like a small matter, but in reality they function as death by a thousand cuts. Their subtle nature allows them to “go unnoticed, particularly by those in positions of power and privilege, [therefore] their larger effect on culture or environment can be hard to trace, surprising, or unexpected.”⁶³ Microaggressions can also be difficult to defend against or even address, particularly when the transgressor genuinely believes they are giving a compliment. Being told once that you “don’t look disabled” can be a disarming and somewhat puzzling experience that

60 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 144.

61 Mia Mingus, ““Disability Justice” is Simply Another Term for Love,” *Leaving Evidence*, November 3, 2018, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2018/11/03/disability-justice-is-simply-another-term-for-love/>.

62 Mia Mingus, ““Disability Justice” is Simply Another Term for Love.”

63 Mia Mingus, “You’re So Sensitive! How LIS Professionals Define and Discuss Microaggressions Online.”

can be hard to respond to in the moment. Being told over and over again throughout your life that you “don’t look disabled” and have that assumption be used against you—by employers to deny accommodations, by co-workers to judge accommodations granted, by medical professionals to deny diagnostic testing or treatment, or by strangers to berate you for using mobility equipment/accessible parking/accessible seating—ultimately adds up to trauma.

While there can be visible signs of disability (e.g. mobility aids), many disabilities are “invisible” and present no visible indicators. Librarians with invisible disabilities report “sometimes encountering suspicion or disbelief because they are not seen as having ‘real’ disabilities,” and are “perceived as lazy, making excuses, causing trouble, or being less reliable or productive.”⁶⁴ People with invisible disabilities may be considered to be “disability passing”⁶⁵ as they appear to be able-bodied. Disability does not exist on a binary, but fluctuates in degree and over time, so the idea that one is concealing a “true” disabled self behind a “false” abled self is not so much the case. Instead, passing is contextual. It is often the case that someone who passes as abled passes because the activities and situation in which they are engaged are not compromised or made problematic by their disability.⁶⁶ A friend of mine with chronic illness once pointed out, “The people who question my disability don’t see me on my bad days, when I am most disabled, because I cannot leave the house.”

Eighty-seven of the ninety-nine respondents answered questions about microaggressions in the workplace. Of those, ~70% of respondents have experienced microaggressions by library users rarely (~24%), sometimes (~32.2%), often (~11.5%), or frequently (~2%) in the workplace. In these cases, microaggressions were predominantly targeting people with disabilities as a group or another library user rather than another library worker or the respondent directly. About ~69% of respondents reported experiencing microaggressions by coworkers either rarely (~28.7%), sometimes (~29.8%), often (~4.59%), or frequently (~5.7%). In these cases, coworkers’ microaggressions were less directed at people with disabilities as a group (~28.7% vs. ~39.1% in the case of microaggressions by library users) and more likely to target another library worker (~13.8%) or the respondent

64 Joanne Oud, “Disability and Equity.”

65 J. A. Brune and D. J. Wilson, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

66 Sarah H. Woolwine and E. M. Dadlez, “Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Disability Passing and Repercussions for Identity,” *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 4 (2016): 951–69.

directly (~18.4%). Survey respondents reported significantly less experiences with microaggressions from supervisors or people in a position of power at their library: only ~55% reported microaggressions, and when they occurred the microaggressions tended to be skewed towards people with disabilities as a group (~26.4%) or the respondent directly (~15%) rather than library users (~6.9%) or another library worker (~10.3%).

Fifty-six of the ninety-nine survey respondents reported experiencing microaggressions or overt aggression (e.g. open hostility, yelling, cursing, physical aggression, etc.) in the workplace. There was fairly even distribution when it came to where this aggression came from: 43 people (~76.8% of respondents) reported receiving abuse from library users, 40 (~71.4% of respondents) from coworkers, and 40 (~71.4% of respondents) from supervisors/people in power.

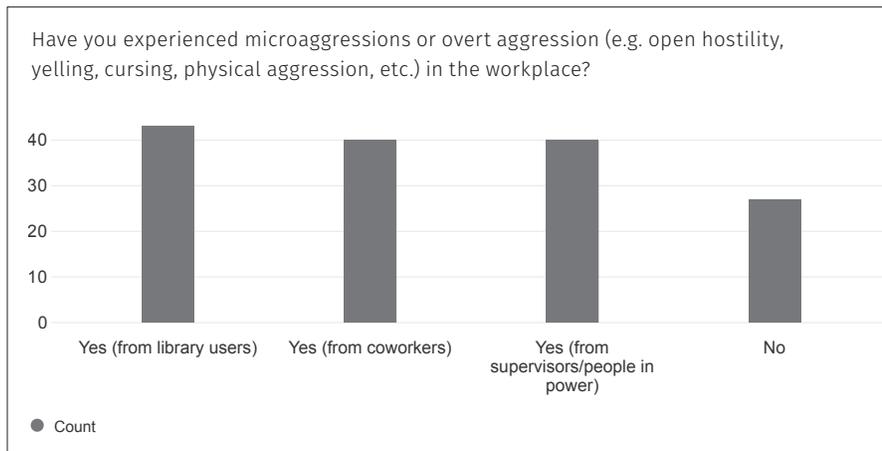


Table 7

When asked about their comfort-level experiencing microaggressions or overt aggression from library users, 50% said that they would feel comfortable approaching someone in power about the situation. However, two-thirds of the respondents said that their comfort level would be affected if the microaggression was directed at them or a group they belong to: all but one said that it would increase their discomfort, making it more likely that they would feel unsafe or not approach someone about the incident. If the episode involved a coworker, two-thirds reported that they would be uncomfortable reporting the incident. If the episode did involve a coworker, more people (two-thirds) said that if the microaggression or overt aggression involved was directed at them or a group they belong to that they would feel unsafe regarding job security, retaliation, etc., if they were to

report the incident. Almost identical results came from the question about the same scenario if the aggressor was a supervisor or in a position of power. I believe that these results illustrate a power dynamic in libraries: library workers feel more empowered to speak up (at least after the fact) about instances of abuse when the aggressor is someone in a position of perceived lower power (i.e. library user). When the aggressor is someone who is perceived to have more social power (someone in a majority group or higher up in the organization) then minority library workers are more likely to feel unsafe coming forward for fear of reprisal.

Microaggressions against disabled people are commonplace. I believe, in part, because disability is something that affects every group of people, and it is a fluctuating status that a person can fall into at any time. Abled people do not like to think that it can happen to them, therefore, people with disabilities and discussion of disability makes abled people uncomfortable. Ableism functions out of an implicit belief that “disability is a negative status and should be eliminated or rehabilitated if possible.”⁶⁷ It ignores the fact that people with disabilities can live long and happy lives. It doesn’t acknowledge that the disability rights movement at the end of the 20th century has “led to changes in self-perception among people with disabilities as they developed minority group consciousness and a strong positive sense of themselves.”⁶⁸ Our insistence that all bodies should be healthy is damaging—there is no standard of health that is achievable for all bodies, as we will all have varying degrees of health and wellness throughout our lives—and arbitrary demands that all bodies behave the same anchor “the systematic oppression of ableism and reinforces the notion that people with illness and disabilities have defective bodies rather than different bodies.”⁶⁹ As Sonya Renee Taylor says in her book, *The Body is Not an Apology*, we need to recognize that our relationships with our bodies are social, political, and economic inheritances.⁷⁰

So what is there to do?

The survey I conducted asked participants to rate the usefulness of resources currently available in their workplaces and the top three resources were:

67 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 72.

68 Evans et al, *Disability in Higher Education*, 45.

69 Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology*, 21–22.

70 Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology*, 37.

flexible scheduling, remote work options, and ergonomic workstations. While flexible scheduling and remote work options may take a bit more time and effort on the part of the organization to work into their culture, ergonomic workstations are a simple ask. Especially in an academic setting where many universities may already have an ergonomics department or program in place to deal with ergonomic workstations across campus. If funding for new chairs and stations are out of the question, what ergonomic training can employees be provided to learn how to better adjust their workstations to their bodies' needs?

I also asked participants which of the following services or resources they wish would be made available in the future:

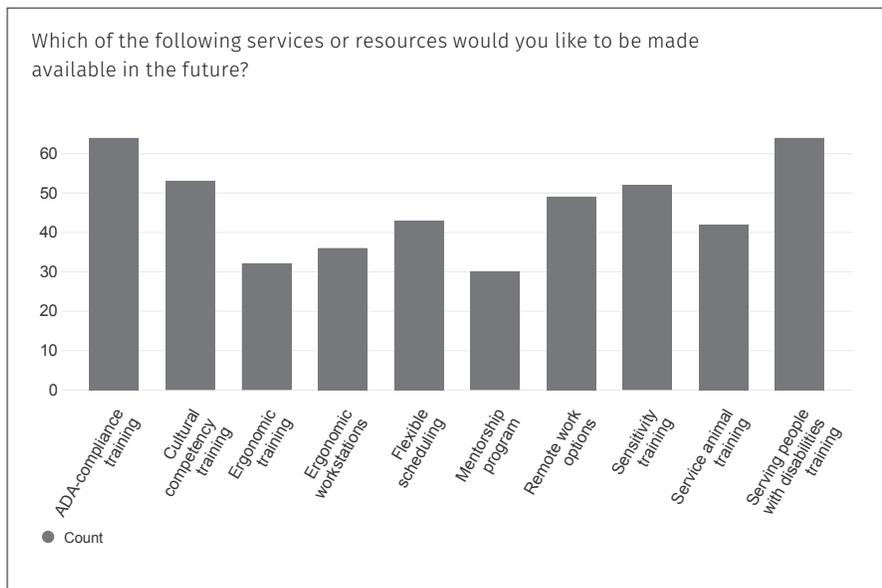


Table 8

Bystander training, though not included in the survey, was a highly requested write-in option. Many people also suggested a need for supervisors to have ADA and sensitivity training specific to supervising employees. Another common request was for training regarding the Family Medical Leave Act (also known as FML/FMLA), which many people with disabilities tend to be put on as a sort of accommodation plan but which also extends protections for many different circumstances (including family illness, parental leave, etc.). Not many people know that they can request accommodations via FML or how to get on FML at their institution. Some respondents asked for training on how to better serve users when disability

intersects with gender identity as well as other communities (linguistic and geographical). There was evident frustration throughout responses about how workplace training on disability is almost entirely restricted to legalities; training on ADA and how not to ask questions about service animals that could get our institutions sued, rather than cultural sensitivity or other trainings to better serve the disability community (e.g. how to better serve users with visual impairments).

When we focus solely on legal issues surrounding disability, we dehumanize disabled people (and their experiences) into problems to be solved rather than addressing issues of inaccessibility on a human-level. Shifting the burden of institutional success from the organization onto individuals creates unwarranted stress on employees and accelerates employee burnout. Our ethos of service must transition from individuals overworked and running on vocational awe to institutions entrenched in radical empathy and an ethic of care.

In her book chapter, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” Shana Higgins responded to Anderson’s article, pointing out that it reflected “a particular dominant positionality that assumes a universal perspective”⁷¹ or, rather, in his assessment of the core values, Anderson assigns less importance to values that are more feminine-coded or care-oriented. Higgins argues that the services and access libraries provide are “contingent on understanding library work as framed by commitments to social responsibility and that are situated in particular communities.”⁷² In this way, Higgins draws the connection between library core values and an ethic of care. Care ethics has been criticized for its foundation in dependency work, and how that work has been deeply rooted and tied to a stereotypical role of “women”. Higgins disagrees with this interpretation, instead centering the idea that care and dependency work is not inherently female but instead “anchored by care and empathy, that may develop from lived and/or shared experiences of oppression and marginalization, and those tasked with responsibility for the well-being of others.”⁷³

As individuals, we need to recognize how social, political, and economic structures inequitably favor certain bodies⁷⁴ and bear witness to the experiences that our colleagues go through. Baharak Yousefi wrote that

71 Shana Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” 69.

72 Shana Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” 69.

73 Shanna Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” 74.

74 In America, heterosexual, cisgender, white, English-speaking man bodies.

“witnessing and acknowledgment can be powerful tools in disrupting the status quo.”⁷⁵ If you are in a majority group, and you hear someone abusing a colleague over their identity make sure that they are—first and foremost—safe, and then check in with them. At some institutions, there are issues with a lack of managerial support regarding responding to or preventing abuse of public service staff by library users. Individuals from traditionally marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to this type of abuse. How can you and your colleagues come up with a new pattern of behavior to interrupt these sorts of interactions? Advocate for bystander intervention training at your institution so that you know how to intercede when situations occur and it becomes second nature.

There are many ways that organizations could attempt change in order to implement care ethics into their workplace culture. Jennifer Gillies and Sherry L. Dupuis conducted a participatory action research study on their college campus, from which they identified and outlined six key principles⁷⁶ for creating an inclusive campus culture:

- *Provide access for all* through a commitment to identifying and alleviating physical, social and systemic obstructions to meaningful community engagement. This may include engaging “in collective action to ensure adequate access to sick days and adequate health care for all employees.”⁷⁷
- *Value the diversity and uniqueness of all* through recognition of individuals as holistic beings, with many facets to their identity, and capable of important contributions.
- *Value interdependence and social responsibility* by providing opportunities for library workers to become aware of the issues affecting others (perhaps through trainings, perhaps through non-traditional professional development opportunities) and by actively fostering a culture of universal responsibility, leadership and volunteerism. Higgins posits

75 Baharak Yousefi, “On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” in *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, ed. Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 99.

76 Jennifer Gillies and Sherry L. Dupuis, “A framework for creating a campus culture of inclusion: a participatory action research approach.” *Annals of Leisure Research* 16, no. 3 (2013): 198, accessed June 12, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2013.832646>.

77 Jessica Schomberg, “Disability at Work: Libraries Built to Exclude,” 121.

that “an interdependence perspective would allow library workers (including leaders) to do several things that relate to care—for ourselves, for our communities, and for our administrators: make visible our affective, ‘reproductive’, and maintenance work; increase and strengthen our collaborative work with our communities, patrons, and users in all areas of library work; and enable us to move away from return-on-investment talk toward valuing ‘our inevitable need for each other’ within the institution.”⁷⁸

- *Value diverse knowledge bases, voices, and perspectives.* All library staff, especially those in positions of power, are expected to actively respond to the perspectives, viewpoints, and ideas of others. People representing various stakeholder groups (e.g. across staff levels) should be both meaningfully and intentionally included on committees, organizations or advisory groups. The emotional labor of the people contributing to this work should be acknowledged, and organizations should be mindful not to tap the same person for every opportunity for the sake of meeting a “quota”.
- *Value the power of learning and education as tools for growth and change,* through formal and informal education opportunities (i.e. social and extra-curricular opportunities).
- *Value the whole person.* This requires us to care for the whole person, to create an organizational culture that upholds work-life balance above a need to do less with more. Community care ideas could include “having regular potluck meals, welcoming infants and elders into the workplace, providing stimming⁷⁹ devices in meetings, engaging in group work to solve complicated problems instead of placing the burden on one person, allowing people to work at home as needed, and ensuring that employees receive clear guidance related to performance expectations and timelines.”⁸⁰

78 Shana Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” 84.

79 “Stimming is short for self-stimulating, a repetitive self-soothing behavior used by neurodivergent people.” From Jessica Schomberg’s “Disability at Work: Libraries Built to Exclude.”

80 Jessica Schomberg, “Disability at Work: Libraries Built to Exclude,” 120–21.

Though Gillies and Dupuis focused on university campus culture, this framework can (and should) be applied in libraries. The six principles identified in the framework can be used as an outline for praxis of care work and feature core values of several disability theories. Both the Social Justice Model and Disability Justice highlight the importance of interdependence in dismantling oppression. The Social Justice Model of disability outlines how we can overcome these forms of oppression via the establishment of equitable access and accommodation within society and the creation of social structures where all people are able to take on equally important tasks and meaningful roles while connecting with other people interdependently. Disability Justice views interdependence as placing value on our connection to others and communities.

Libraries are not mythical or sacred spaces existing in a vacuum. They are comprised of people who do the work, who serve their communities. Our work is centered on connection to others—other library workers, other departments, other institutions, all of the communities that come into our spaces and whose spaces we also exist in. We need to recenter our ethos of service in intersectionality and interdependence in order to truly achieve our core values as a profession. Recognizing the individual's role in service and adjusting our ethos of service within the field to an ethos of care will remove some of the stigma Disabled library workers face at work and create a better work environment for all library employees.

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