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Imagining a Climate of Equity through a Critical Theory of Love: Using CPAR to Identify Guiding Principles That Humanize Library Work

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Abstract

Diversity is a core value of the American Library Association and diversity standards including cultural competencies have been adopted by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Nevertheless, academic libraries still have obstacles to overcome to embody these principles. Minorities continue to be underrepresented in the field and many encounter barriers within library cultures where cultural competency is lacking and micro aggressions are pervasive and invisible to many white colleagues. This study uses critical participatory action research to identify ways a library diversity and inclusion team can support library employees engaging in equity-minded work at a private, predominantly white Catholic university in the Midwest. The researchers developed a moderator guide, which they used to conduct focus groups with library faculty and staff. Library employees were asked to identify the challenges and opportunities for doing equity-minded work at the institution. What emerged from these conversations led to the development of four guiding principles. The guiding principles outlined are: a) engaging stakeholders; b) building relationships; c) modeling equity-minded practice; and d) demonstrating intercultural competence. These guiding principles are embedded in a critical theory of love as well as critical emotion and critical whiteness studies. These principles promote re-humanizing the ways in which library employees interact with each other and students while resisting the normalization of white cultural practices. Action item examples are offered to demonstrate how library employees can incorporate these principles into their practice. Finally, we offer our next steps moving forward as we plan to implement these guiding principles to support a climate of equity for library employees.

Keywords: library employees, guiding principles, critical theory of love, critical whiteness studies, critical emotion studies academic library

Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries have had difficulties overcoming obstacles to becoming more diverse, as evidenced in the continued underemployment of minorities in the profession. About 88% of librarians are white and 83% are female, while only 12% of library professionals are racial or ethnic minorities (ALA, 2012a). Cruz (2019) reviewed the current context and activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within academic libraries and found this trend persists despite identifying diversity as a core value of librarianship and developing cultural competency standards for academic libraries (ALA, 2012b), which were adopted in 2012 by the Association for College and Research Librarians. Librarians of color have noticed differences in treatment as compared to non-minorities, noting not only that they experienced micro aggressions regularly but also how often non-minority librarians failed to notice these negative interactions among peers (Alabi, 2015). This suggests a lack of cultural competency among non-minority librarians. Tenure-track academic librarians of color have also noted additional barriers to obtaining tenure, including lack of esteem for their scholarship (especially when focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion), lack of high-quality mentorship, and explicit racism in their work environments (Damasco & Hodges, 2012). Even for non-minority librarians at academic libraries, issues of low morale have been observed and can result from toxic work environments, leading to mental and physical health impacts on employees that can adversely affect their work (Kendrick, 2017). These findings clearly suggest barriers exist to creating equitable and inclusive work environments for all library employees within academic libraries and especially for minority

librarians. To retain minority employees, library leaders must cultivate an anti-racist library

culture and engage all employees in the process. These efforts can be facilitated through

diversity and inclusion committees. For the purpose of this study, the researchers sought to

identify ways a library D&I committee could support library employees engaging in equity-

minded work at a private, Catholic institution in the Midwest.

Library diversity and inclusion (D&I) committees can aid academic libraries in

addressing some of the barriers to performing diversity, equity, and inclusion work within their

environments. For example, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Libraries

established a D&I committee to improve communication and develop cultural competency

among staff (Duffus et al., 2016). Their activities included lunchtime workshops, a film

discussion series, establishing a Diversity Resident position, and hosting librarians from China to

share their culture with the surrounding community. Another salient example was executed at

the joint library of the University of Washington-Bothell and Cascadia Community College,

where a D&I committee was established after the ACRL diversity standards came out. D&I

members were charged with participating in a campus group or acting as liaison to an

underserved library population in addition to representing the library at campus diversity and

social justice events (Lazarro et al., 2014). Additionally, Penn State's University Libraries

diversity committee conducted a climate survey, which identified a lack of action among library

employees when inappropriate or offensive comments about race, sex, or other identity

characteristics were made (Knapp, Snavely, & Klimczyk, 2012). To address this lack of action,

the diversity committee implemented the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Speak Up!* Program to

give Penn State University Libraries employees tools to respond to racist, sexist, or offensive

remarks. These examples describe how library D&I committees can identify problems and

propose solutions to creating more inclusive and equitable work environments by engaging faculty and staff within their academic library.

Engagement with diverse colleagues can change the way people think about those they consider to be different from themselves, but it can also further polarize differing viewpoints if not implemented well. How diversity is discussed becomes just as important as what is discussed. Understanding and exploring diverse perspectives is a prerequisite to creating more equitable and inclusive environments. In this way, cultural competence becomes an impetus for enacting social change. Discussing social identity, power, and privilege can bring to light normative assumptions in order to break the silence that maintains status quo modes of thinking. Critically examining these concepts in context to the specific roles library staff play and the power library directors, supervisors, faculty, and staff leverage through maintaining normative assumptions creates a path to transform this dynamic. "Norms are shaped by history, context, and power but are lived, legitimated, and enacted by individuals and groups who make decisions about what is known and what the impact of that knowing will be personally and globally (Pusser, 2015, p. 74). Creating equitable work environments requires employees to have cultural competence skills to disrupt status quo relationships of power within systems and structures.

Campus Engagement with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The President at the university in this study has affirmed "that diversity, equity, and inclusion are inextricably linked with excellence" and "align with our mission of building community in the world and working for justice for all people." The campus community is predominantly white and university administrators want to increase racial and socioeconomic diversity among students, faculty, and staff. Community members were asked to advance the institutional mission to create an inclusive and equitable community for all. At the time of this

study, 56 library employees (35 staff and 21 faculty) worked in five library departments (collections and operations, public services, cataloging, technology and information systems, and special collections). This private, Catholic university is an excellent site to examine how an academic library D&I team could support equity-minded work as the impetus exists for its transformation through commitments to social justice by those in positions of authority on campus.

Although those in authority may be in support of cultural transformation within this predominantly white campus community, resistance to change generally as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts specifically are expected. While the university is committed to increasing its diversity in employment, it continues to primarily employ white individuals, especially when positions of power and authority are considered. Given that the campus is predominantly white, applying critical theoretical frameworks resisting white cultural norms as 'the way it is' on campus is essential to social transformation and organizational change. As a Catholic community that embraces the education of the whole person, a critical theory of love (Brooks, 2017) that resists dehumanization and supports care for the physical, emotional, psychological, sexual as well as spiritual dimensions of personhood is an essential component to social justice advocacy. Love is what justice looks like in public (West, 2014) and without love, freedom from oppression and exploitation are impossible (hooks, 1994). A loving heart is the foundation of meaningful spiritual practice (hooks, 1993) and a critical theory of love centers campus community members' whole selves while supporting individual journeys toward meaningful spiritual practice. Often, white cultural norms allow for and encourage 'power over' dynamics in which objectification, domination, ownership, and aggression towards others is encouraged rather than 'power with' cultural practices where humanization, cooperation, growth,

and connection are reinforced (Brooks, 2017). The acceptance of 'power over' cultural practices

are subtle and often require one to dig deeper to 'make the invisible visible.' Professed feelings

of empathy and care by whites can belie veiled feelings of disgust for people of color (Matias &

Zembylas, 2014), which is why declarations of care are inauthentic unless accompanied by

action. Matias and Zembylas urge folks to critically evaluate stated feelings of care by whites to

unpack the hidden feelings of disgust many whites often convey in these statements, urging us to

apply a critical compassion in these situations.

Recognition of Power and Positionality

For critical researchers, theory and practice is understood in relation to dominance,

power, and authority within sociopolitical and historical contexts; facts cannot be separated from

values and mainstream research that reasserts systems of privilege and oppression (Kincheloe,

McLaren, & Steinberg, 2013). Critical theorists emphasize the need to analyze the role of

power, control, and authority as they seek to empower the marginalized and transform

oppressive structures through their research. Critical researchers incorporate methodologies that

include multiple voices and perspectives to discover truth as it relates to social power, structures,

and systems (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013). The researchers worked with participants to

amplify their voices and ground theories in their lived experiences in order to imagine more

equitable library social structures and systems to take steps toward transformative action.

Including participants in the research process lends validity to study results (Borda, 1999) while

also empowering participants to work with the researchers to create emancipatory knowledge

(Freire, 1970). For researchers to authentically include participants, trust and rapport must be

built while the researchers' power to influence the process is minimized and participant voices

are elevated. This allows the researchers to live their espoused values and realize their democratic intentions.

An awareness of positionality is essential for critical researchers to see beyond the ways of being with which they are familiar to be open, understand, and elevate participant voices. The authors acknowledge opportunities as well as challenges related to studying the institutions' library culture. As a mostly white, heteroflexible cisgender female, Barnett embodies characteristics akin to the predominantly white, female, heterosexual base of academic librarians. As an employee, student, and active campus community member, she understands many aspects of community culture and the obstacles to overcome to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus environment. As a non-credentialed library employee who is not Catholic, there are cultural elements both within the library (such as the experience of attending library school) and the institution (such as nuanced interpretations or understandings of Catholic teachings) with which [she] remains unfamiliar. To minimize the biases she may bring to her interpretations of participant perceptions, [she] reflected regularly to bring to light and criticize her own assumptions throughout the research process.

As a Jewish, white, fluid, cisgender male who is a middle-aged tenure-line faculty member at the university being studied, Witenstein also has opportunities and challenges related to studying the institutions' library culture. Firstly, he studies higher education contexts both in the US and globally, yet does not typically study academic library culture. However, he does typically study higher education organizational culture and policy. He also has taught Barnett and supervised her in independent study. To enhance his academic library culture context, he has engaged in numerous, prolonged in-depth conversations with Barnett over two academic years. Nevertheless, as an outsider to the library's working culture, he defers to her keen insight

and knowledge. He does bring experience utilizing participatory action research and the critical theory of love to support this project. As Barnett has done, Witenstein regularly reflected on his assumptions and biases throughout the research process and also held regular reflective conversations with Barnett throughout.

Impetus for the Study

The researchers examined library employees' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities to doing equity-minded work in their academic library, with the goal of identifying steps the libraries' diversity and inclusion (D&I) team could take to support such work at a private, Catholic university in the Midwest. The library serves over 11,000 students, of which about 8,500 are undergraduates. About 95% of students are full-time and 98% are 24 and under. About 80% of students are white, 6% are Hispanic/Latino, 5% are international, 5% are multiracial, 3% are black/African American, and 1% are Asian. Incorporating a critical approach allowed the researchers to examine how power, systems, and structures influence employees' abilities to approach their work with equity-mindedness. Using participatory action research (PAR), the researchers worked with library employees to create an inclusive process where voices were valued and researchers were transparent, encouraging support for any actions taken while modeling the social justice values inherent in doing diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

This study may benefit academic library administrators at the university as they consider how to better support equity-minded work for those they manage. It may also provide insight to university leaders as to how academic unit leaders live the espoused values of the institution, transforming the ways in which work is performed to better align with an organizational climate that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive. The study may benefit the students, faculty, and staff who frequent the library as new ways of performing work lead to better mechanisms for meeting

the diverse needs of library users. Participants may also benefit from their participation as they

make meaning of their experiences as employees through discussing and reflecting on their

personal history, experiences, and those of their colleagues. While this study explored the

unique experiences of library employees at one university, similarly situated colleagues at peer

institutions or academic libraries with similar sociohistorical, political, and cultural forces

shaping their work environments may also find value in the research findings.

Design and Methodology

Approach and Rationale

Our aim was to identify ways to support equity-minded work for library faculty and staff

while taking into account library employees' perceptions of the current systemic structures that

present opportunities as well as challenges to creating a culture of equity in the library. The

action-oriented nature of this project coupled with its goal for positive social change through

navigating power dynamics and systems makes critical participatory action research an ideal

framework within which to conduct the research (Borda, 1991). Because we are using a critical

participatory action research approach, an initial plan was developed for the project but the

critical theories and action steps identified were developed based on what emerged from

engaging with library employees throughout the research process. This approach enhanced the

researchers' abilities to authentically involve participants while affirming their voices, increasing

buy-in, and inspiring employees to take ownership of and get involved in actions that support

equity-mindedness.

The library is situated within a private, Catholic university in the Midwest committed to

social justice, equity, and inclusion, values the college President states are aggressively pursued

because they align with the university's mission to build community and work toward justice for

all people. How institutional leaders frame issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion may shape

the way students, faculty, and staff discuss these issues on campus. Indeed, library employees at

times framed their discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion using the shared language and

images with which they were familiar from attending workshops and training on campus. The

impetus exists for the university to transform itself through critical dialogues about equity and

inclusivity, which could serve as models for employees to frame their own thoughts on social

justice action, offering an opportunity for real social action.

Barnett's research role was complex as an employee of the library, member of the

diversity and inclusion team, and researcher. She tried not to lose sight of this throughout the

research process. She attempted to create an ideal speech situation (Bevan, 2013, Call-

Cummings, 2017) to directly address any perceived power differences, be transparent, and invite

participants to engage in every step of the process. She kept a journal to reflect regularly, which

allowed her to adjust her practice to align with the findings that emerged from participant

discussions. It was also essential for the researchers to build trust with library employees.

Participants were asked to follow guidelines that offered each participant an opportunity to share

and ensure what was shared would be kept confidential. Participants were able to review, edit,

or make suggestions to the findings before they were shared with anyone outside the initial focus

group discussion to ensure confidentiality and credibility of the findings.

Key to ensuring authenticity with research participants included building rapport and

being aware of one's status and authority as a researcher while patiently probing, actively

thinking, and sympathetically listening during interviews or focus groups (Madison, 2012).

Analyzing data collected from participants during focus groups should add to emancipatory

knowledge by further uncovering how power drives participant thoughts and actions. In

connecting data analysis to theory, we tried to consider how findings could give voice to the marginalized and explore how a more just and equitable power dynamic could come from their implications. Participants gave their time and valuable information, which has the power to inform future equity initiatives and critical dialogues on campus. We tried to represent their voice authentically and hope this critical participatory action research process created opportunities for participants to self-reflect further as they continue to think about how to best support equity-minded work in the library.

We obtained appropriate permissions through the institutional review board (IRB) and committed to the Belmont Report guidelines for respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Our ethical concerns went above and beyond those minimum guidelines as we attempted to be transparent with participants at every step in the process. We clearly stated the research goals and theoretical frame prior to the focus groups and invited open, honest communication while being respectful of and including participant voices throughout the process. Working with marginalized employees and dialoguing about social justice present their own ethical considerations and we made conscientious efforts to be sensitive to participant needs throughout the process. We involved participants at every step and gave them opportunities to review preliminary findings (member-checking) and any solutions to the problems identified from those findings. This ensured the process was participatory as it enhanced credibility.

It would be naïve of us not to consider how politics could shape the research. The dominant narrative within which social justice issues are framed on this private, Catholic university campus is connected to the institutional mission and core values inherent in the stories of its religious founders. Systemic pressures may exist to conform to a Catholic framework and conforming in this way may enable social justice transformation on campus as employees are

encouraged to embrace institutional values. As the university is committed to social justice, equity, and inclusion, it makes sense that these values would be embraced; but given some of the challenges identified by library employees, it is also important to consider how the Catholic identity of the institution creates opportunities as well as barriers to doing social justice work.

Data Construction Methods

We designed a moderator guide based on principles outlined in Danner, Pickering, & Pared (2018). The guide included an introduction, where the project goals and researcher positionalities were identified. Community guidelines were also set and participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary but encouraged. We prepared a copy of the library's D&I team charge as well as a list of potential ways equity-minded work could be supported as prompts in case participants asked for more information or examples. Library employees were invited to participate in focus groups via email, first by the chair of the D&I team (who abstained from participation) and then by Barnett. Ten employees expressed interest in participating, but only seven were able to attend the focus groups, which were conducted in September 2019. The seven participants represented all five library units (public services, technical services, cataloging and acquisitions, collections and operations, and special collections) and four (57%) were current members of the D&I team. Participants were female (100%), mostly white (86%), and mostly heterosexual (86%). Non-majority (non-white, non-heterosexual) participants' comments were elevated to ensure their perspectives were included.

The researchers conducted active, semi-structured focus groups about 60 minutes in duration. Questions centered on the following topics: What does equity mean to you and how do you apply the term to the work you do in the library? What opportunities and challenges do you see to doing equity-minded library work? In what ways do you envision the D&I team

supporting your ability to do equity-minded work in the libraries? What might that look like?

Participants were given activities to generate ideas individually and then shared their reflections

with the group. Participants were also asked to identify their top priority for supporting equity-

minded library work. Focus groups were audio-recorded for transcription purposes and copious

field notes were taken and used to contextualize findings.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researchers went through both focus group transcripts, identifying codes to describe

library employee experiences, thoughts, feelings, judgments, and values. This coding process

resulted in over 20 codes that were then applied to the text and used to regroup and reorganize

the data. Coding the focus group texts revealed that library systems and structures, institutional

identity (especially as it conflicts with personal identity), lack of a diverse workforce, and limited

resources were the most frequently mentioned topics in reference to the challenges to doing

equity-minded library work. Since this project is focused on action-oriented steps to support

equity-minded library work, participant perspectives on opportunities to doing equity-minded

library work were used to generate a list of suggestions for the D&I team. Four themes emerged

(engaging stakeholders, building relationships, modeling equity-mindedness, and demonstrating

intercultural competence) as the guiding principles that focused this critical participatory action

research project and these themes were then used to develop a new practice to support a culture

of equity within the library.

Findings

In talking about supporting equity-minded library work, one group focused on the

privileged position of librarians and the responsibility of library employees to "seek the truth"

and promote equity in their work. One librarian spoke of how learning about whiteness has

helped her better understand her privilege:

>"I feel like in the last 2 or 3 years, as I've started to understand more about
>
>whiteness, it's helped me to understand my own privileges and have
>
>consciousness about that so I can create more equitable environments for people
>
>who don't have those privileges."

Participants also pointed out the need to be critical of what they were taught in library school,

such as the historical orientation of how libraries are neutral:

>"I've been realizing more and more that is not true. We are not neutral, we are
>
>working towards the greater good and that takes action and engagement and not
>
>just neutrality."

Participants pointed out how some issues libraries are currently facing are a direct result of the

choices librarians have made when doing their work:

>"Archives have a nasty history of not collecting underrepresented, minority voices
>
>because we didn't see them as important or worthy of being retained and many of
>
>those voices aren't involved in this work."

Librarians must remain aware of "whose stories are not being told and captured and

documented," which requires "leaning back from the word 'neutral' to describe what we've

always done in recognition that nothing is neutral, nothing is objective, everything reflects

choices made." Participants saw how historical decisions have shaped the current state of

libraries as well as their role to change it as librarians "are in a position of opportunity to correct

it." Themes identified here represent how librarians envisioned equity work could be supported.

Engaging Stakeholders

Most participants (71%) identified the importance of engaging stakeholders in order to effectively support equity-minded library work. The theme that everyone, especially those impacted by decisions, should be a part of conversations and the decision-making process was pervasive in one of the focus groups. A staff member stated, "I'm not often included in making the decisions because I am not the decision maker" and everyone agreed with a statement made by a participant that "hierarchy distracts from equity." Participants felt they were receiving mixed messages as to how they can interact with students given their library roles. Two participants discussed the "perception that only some staff can talk and have interactions with students" and that if this is the case, "how can student concerns [be] supported equitably?" Diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops were discussed and one participant remembered "a great session" where all library employees participated and she wanted to find ways to involve all employees in equity activities. Participants also suggested that library staff reach out to students outside of the library to "meet students where they are at." Due to limited resources, these participants thought it was important to partner with colleagues to help students." In the other focus group, participants recognized that "libraries can level the playing field for everybody, "but we're only reaching those students that "come into the library and interact with us and approach us." Conducting outreach might also allow us to "begin to overcome [our negative history] … and rebuild that relationship and repair that trust."

Building Relationships

Building relationships is key to having effective interactions with stakeholders and most participants (71%) identified aspects of relationship building as essential to doing equity-minded library work. In fact, the top priority identified to support equity-minded work for most

participants (60%) was relationship building with students. However, participants also

recognized the importance of building relationships among library employees. One participant

recognized that "we can't work cohesively together unless we are all on the same page and

respect one another too" and that equity is about "having a mutual respect for everyone and what

they bring to the organization." Another participant was concerned that "better decisions may not

come forward because people may not feel like everyone is getting equitable treatment and may

not voice [their views]." Furthermore, participants felt it was important to recognize that some

library employees have relationships with students that might not be related to their role in the

library. Unfortunately, often "assumptions may be made about what work colleagues are doing

when dialoguing with students" and existing relationships between library employees and

students are not always understood or recognized by supervisors. These relationships become

particularly important when we consider how library anxiety might impact some students.

> "Library anxiety is real and if you don't grow up going to libraries and see these
>
> spaces as for you then why would you see it as a space you can work in? We've
>
> reached out to students to break down barriers of library anxiety and
>
> intimidation."

Rather than assume we know what students want, especially those currently underserved by the

library, "we need to reach out and ask them what they want." At the same time, we cannot

expect these students to open up and trust us now just because we want to engage with them.

> "It may take a long time because of the centuries of not doing it right, it's not
>
> going to change overnight that minority populations are suddenly going to have
>
> trust in these institutions… It's a very long game."

In this way, participants recognized the responsibility library employees have to treat colleagues and patrons with respect in order to create a welcoming library environment where everyone's needs are supported and individuals are valued for what they bring to the organization.

Modeling Equity-Mindedness

Although fewer participants (57%) directly mentioned examples of the ways they model equity-mindedness through their work, the examples mentioned highlight how some equity-minded practices are already in place and could serve as models for library employees. A supervisor shared how "I lean a lot on my team to make decisions. Therefore, showing we are all equitable because I can't do my job without them doing theirs." A staff member mentioned how "I'm trying to be mindful about how I treat people and interact with them. I am always searching for ways to be more equitable in our office." Another staff member mentioned how we make "eye contact, [and a] first introduction that opens the door [to engaging students]," all of which highlight everyday actions library employees take to show respect, which is an essential element of including diverse perspectives and creating a culture of equity. Additionally, many ideas listed under the previous themes of engaging stakeholders and building relationships also demonstrate ways library employees can model equity-mindedness.

Demonstrating Intercultural Competence

All participants (100%) discussed aspects of intercultural competence throughout the focus group discussions. Once participant recognized that "we are culturally unaware," and becoming aware of cultures globally is essential to doing equity-minded work. Another recognized that intercultural competence also requires self-work and that "becoming aware of our own privilege" is an important first step. One focus group in particular talked extensively about the library's lack of a diverse workforce, even questioning what role our workforce plays

in that reality. "It takes more humans and we need more diversity, but we can't keep librarians. Is that a flaw? Is it us that's driving them away?" If we are engaging with students, we need to "learn more about how to pronounce names and recognize cultural traditions" and empower staff by giving them tools so they can "step in and help when [they] witness confusion and issues with addressing students by their names." One participant mentioned that having a "consistent message from the library staff in their signature line would be helpful" to demonstrate cultural competence and several participants referred to having preferred pronouns in their email signature. Another participant recognized the value of a new space in the library to work on intercultural competencies. "The Dialogue Zone will open up conversations that we've never had before and can be a space where we can do it." Another participant connected intercultural competence to how we should "think and talk about policies," mentioning an anti-racist speaker who shared how we can determine if policies are anti-racist.

Catholic Identity

It is important to note that participants also recognized how the Catholic identity of the institution sometimes gets in the way of creating equitable and inclusive environments for all. One focus group had an in-depth discussion of how "it's hard to work here and be at odds with the Catholic principles." One participant did not want colleagues to know when she divorced as she felt that "some people who are Catholic would judge me." Another shared how inequity is 'baked into our DNA' and that "the huge elephant in the room is 'yes, this is a Catholic Marianist institution and the Church is so incredibly patriarchal and committed to being that way." Inequity in sexual identity was also discussed as one focus group member questioned whether it was safe for her queer child to attend the institution and another focus group member shared their conflicted feelings about authentically identifying within this Catholic community:

"I identify as a [non-majority] person … and I still work with some very

conservative people that I don't feel comfortable exposing that information to …

and so when I'm thinking about this work, I'm thinking about how I can't even

really fully be myself here, so how can I help students do that? And I feel very

torn between those two things."

Other focus group members shared their perceptions of how Catholic teachings did not always

align with values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. After describing the call to celibacy, one

focus group member shared:

"I cannot live with that anymore but there are church documents that they have to

comply with and this call to celibacy … I feel duplicitous in saying I am working

here and supporting the Catholic identity … and yet I am so at odds with that."

Another participant resolved their challenge with accepting certain ideals by becoming what their

grandmother calls a 'Cafeteria Catholic.' "I pick and choose the social justice part of

Catholicism and I feel there is no place left in the Church for me." For another participant, this

strategy is in and of itself problematic:

"It's really hard to think that people are picking and choosing cafeteria style what

Catholic teachings, and that's a challenge we have as a library at a Catholic

institution."

Discussion of Findings

Focus group participants recognized the importance of engaging stakeholders to embody

the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Stakeholders identified included colleagues,

students, and managers as well as underserved or marginalized populations. In order to

effectively engage stakeholders, behaviors that embody relationship building were identified as

essential. Having a mutual respect for colleagues was essential to working cohesively together.

Employees who did not feel respected did not always share their views and their silence might

have led to a less optimal solution to problems identified by management. Participants also

recognized how library systems and structures get in the way of doing equity-minded work and

how at times, supervisors reprimanded them for not following procedures when employees were

assisting library users. In this way, a lack of relationship building between managers and those

they manage disrupts employees' abilities to help library users, which could enhance rather than

reduce library anxiety or intimidation experienced by some library users. It could also create the

kind of toxic work environments that lower morale as well as negatively impact the mental and

physical health of library employees (Kendrick, 2017).

Some participants shared ways they model equity-mindedness in their work, while all

identified ways in which intercultural competence is lacking among library employees. While

some of the participants were examining their privileges as white librarians, others recognized

how many current library employees have not examined their privilege and lack understanding

about the role it plays in academic library settings. Focus group members expected the dean to

send the message to all employees that equity work is everybody's work. Participants saw

humanization, cooperation, personal growth, and connection as important cultural practices to

support equity-mindedness – the same 'power with' cultural practices typically absent in

predominantly white settings (Brooks, 2017). Participants were also looking for direction from

leaders to provide a framework for consistent and inclusive messages in their electronic

communications as well as tools or training to effectively engage when they observed issues

between colleagues and students, such as properly addressing students by their names.

Rethinking how spaces are used and revisiting library structures and policies to ensure they are

anti-racist were important to participants in order to improve equity-minded library practices.

The library has a dedicated space where sustained dialogues can occur and this space could be

used for further engagement on these topics. Librarians could also reach out to students

underserved by the library to identify specific ways they can meet the needs of diverse library

users. Additional training for library professionals in providing information services to diverse

populations and developing culturally competency (Cooke, 2017) could also support librarians

and build their confidence in performing equity-minded work. A follow up study could explore

non-majority student perceptions of how library professionals provide information services.

Employees had concerns about how the Catholic identity of the institution might limit

their ability to do equity-minded work, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality. The

patriarchal organization of the Church as well as its support of homophobic policies were

perceived barriers to doing equity-minded work. Participants identified some of the conflicts

they personally suffer while trying to navigate being their authentic selves and supporting

institutional values. At times, the institutional values of diversity, equity, and inclusion were

perceived by participants to be at odds with Catholic social teachings as well. This presents an

opportunity for university leaders to engage these employee concerns with love to demonstrate

care while remaining true to meaningful spiritual practice. It also offers university leaders an

opportunity to further define and demonstrate what equity means at their religious institution.

Participant views fit with the critical theory of love in important ways. When talking

about the challenges as well as opportunities to doing equity-minded work, participants

recognized how aspects of their full personhood (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and

sexual) were impacted. Their emphasis on care and relationship building are essential elements

of incorporating a social justice framework so long as that care is authentic. Actions speak

louder than words and demonstrating care toward others should be prioritized (Matias &

Zembylas, 2014). Participants identified the importance of engaging all library employees when

doing equity-minded work. As a result of engaging with library employees for this action

research project, the D&I team is leading efforts to create opportunities for all library employees

to engage diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. This includes working with colleagues to

identify how equity applies to the work performed within departments. A case study activity was

developed to examine library-specific scenarios where issues of equity arise to encourage active

discussion, participation, and reflection as colleagues work together to identify equitable and

inclusive solutions. The D&I team is also collaborating with campus partners to hold workshops

with library administrators that encourage inclusive and equitable leadership practices.

It is important to note that these findings are generated from mostly white, heterosexual,

and female perspectives. The researchers were careful to ensure minority voices were elevated

in the sharing of findings and their perspectives affirmed. Often, these perspectives shed light on

systemic issues both within the library culture and the institution that create barriers to doing

equity-minded work. However, the prevalence of white (as well as female/heterosexual)

participants within the focus groups may have influenced the ways in which white cultural

practices (as well as gender and sexuality) was (or was not) discussed. Future research that

explores minority library professional perspectives could complement the findings of this study.

Conclusion

This study represents an iterative process of acting, reflecting, and applying critical

theory to improve the ability for employees to do equity-minded work at an academic library.

Four themes (engaging stakeholders building relationships, modeling equity-minded practices,

and demonstrating intercultural competence) were identified as the guiding principles for

supporting equity-minded library work (see Table 1) as these concepts were mentioned regularly

by participants in both focus groups as they discussed how to best support equity-minded work.

Action item examples in the table were generated from participant responses as well as from tips

identified in Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009), questions from the Racial Impact

Assessment Guide (2009), critical assessment ideas in Magnus, Faber, and Belanger (2018), and

the application of the critical theory of love (Brooks, 2017), critical whiteness and critical

emotion studies (Matias & Zembylas, 2014) to the guiding principles that emerged. These

guiding principles and example action items were then used to develop a framework for creating

equity activities (i.e. case studies) for library employees to engage in within their work divisions.

Table 1
Guiding Principles with Action Item Examples

Guiding Principle	Example Action Items
Engaging Stakeholders	Identify what group(s) are impacted by a new policy, practice, or proposal and include representative(s) from the group(s) in your decision-making process
	Authentically or meaningfully involve different perspectives (esp. from those most adversely impacted by decisions) to changes in policy or practice or with proposal development, etc.
	Involve individuals who are valued and respected by the groups they represent or serve
Building Relationships	Listen to understand, not just respond
	Center individuals' experiences by affirming their mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual dimensions (i.e. full personhood)
	Acknowledge participants' feelings or beliefs
Modeling Equity-Mindedness	Reflect on how your identity, institutional role(s) and perspectives shape your work
	Take action to support someone in need
	Work with those most adversely impacted by policies, practices, or processes to find an equitable solution to a policy/practice change
Demonstrating Intercultural Competence	Seek out perspectives different from your own to solve problems or make decisions
	Consider alternative(s) to complete tasks that reduce disparities or advance equity
	Consider the underlying values, bases or assumptions emphasized in the decision-making process and its solution

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