



Evidence Summary

EDI and Anti-Racism Work Is Labour-Intensive for Racialized Academic Librarians (and Organizations Could Do More to Address This)

A Review of:

Vong, S., Cho, A., & Norlin, E. (2023). The five labours of equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism work of racialized academic librarians. *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion*, 7(3/4), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v7i3/4.41002>

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Abstract

Objective – To explore the experiences of racialized librarians who participate in their institution’s equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and anti-racism initiatives, and to identify the types of labours impacting these librarians.

Design – Qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Study participants were from academic libraries and institutions in both the United States and Canada.

Subjects – Fourteen librarians who identified as members of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) or racialized communities, across different career stages.

Methods – After answering an initial survey on barriers within their organization, respondents participated in semi-structured interviews, from which emerged noteworthy data about EDI, anti-racism work, labour, identity, as well as workload issues (among other topics). After the researchers conducted multiple rounds of data transcription and coded data through the lens of invisible labour, key themes were explored further to better understand important findings and concepts.

Main Results – Study participants shared that their work on EDI and anti-racism initiatives at their institutions have caused them to endure multiple forms of labour (such as emotional, interpretive, identity, racialized, and aspirational). Racist encounters were experienced by all participants. The participants in this study offered tangible suggestions on how institutional practices could change more broadly, so that all library staff can engage with this work from a place of power and choice.

Conclusion – The racialized librarians who participated in this study are bearing the weight of institutional engagement with EDI and anti-racism initiatives. Moving forward, administrators and managers should support organizational changes, such as permanently employing EDI experts, formalized compensation for library staff engaging in this work, appropriate training for all employees, dedicated funding for equity-deserving groups, and accountability structures for leaders.

Commentary

This work builds on other efforts to reveal the experiences of racialized librarians in academia, including Brown et al. (2021) who discuss the uneven distribution of diversity initiatives onto BIPOC employees' workloads. In addition, this study builds on the lead author's previous work, which provides a vivid portrait of a librarian being outwardly tokenized by their colleagues (Vong, 2022), to give further space for racialized librarians' voices to be heard. The authors indicate that participants were recruited as part of a larger study on organizational barriers that first utilized survey methodology. Participants then engaged in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The significant presence of interview data regarding identities and EDI workload warranted a separate analysis and manuscript. This article is therefore reviewed as a qualitative study using the critical appraisal tool by Letts et al. (2007).

The strength of its evidence is found in the thorough background and literature review sections (where the authors' choice to use the term 'racialized' is explained), the use of appropriate methods, and the way in which detailed findings are presented thematically. In preparing the reader to understand this work, the authors are careful to distinguish their EDI and anti-racism scholarship from that on Indigenization and de-colonization and to tell the reader that no study participants identified as Indigenous Peoples. While a theoretical perspective for this work is not outwardly stated, the authors refer to critical race theory when discussing their thoughts surrounding identity language, which suggests this framework impacted the researchers' position. Adding further to this, positionality is communicated through statements provided at the end of the paper detailing the authors' self-identities and professional experiences.

In considering gaps in this article, the reader may be left wanting additional information surrounding the data collection process itself. While the use of semi-structured interviews was appropriate, the authors do not explain where the interviews took place (other than noting that participants work in Canada and the United States). Interviews were audio-recorded and took one hour to complete, yet it is unclear if this took place in a video call, phone call, or in person. In addition to this, while the data analysis procedure was highly inductive and measures were taken to reduce team member bias, the authors do not confirm if member checking procedures took place. Despite this, the study retains its credibility and dependability because the authors depicted participants' lived experiences through detailed accounts, and they respected participants' preferred identity language in their reporting.

Additionally, the authors remained reflexive in their understanding of key concepts, which they sought clarification on from additional research sources.

While this work is situated within the academic library context (and the authors acknowledge that interview findings are not intentionally representative of all racialized librarians), this study's conclusions are still relevant to any library engaged in EDI and anti-racism initiatives. The authors' argument that administrators must properly resource and promote diversity efforts can apply across librarianship to ensure that racialized library employees in any setting are not championing this work alone. Also, through indicating that EDI and anti-racism work should be given the gravitas it deserves, the authors invite library management to prioritize these initiatives beyond their performative nature, which impacts the workplace's values regardless of library type. Therefore, this study is important reading for anyone working in libraries broadly, especially for those in leadership roles who have the power to enact change at the organizational level.

References

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