Gender Identity and Performance in Library Work

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What we know
Libraries are patriarchal institutions. But as a majority-women profession, norms are upheld differently than in other types of organizations.
- Men are ferried into higher paying, more administrative and supervisory positions (even that women are in traditionally female jobs. (Millikan 1982)
- Library leadership is dominated by men because, while the ethos of librarianship is feminized, leadership qualities are still very masculinized. (Neigel 2017)
- Women are expected to exhibit relational behaviors (mentoring, service, emotional labor) at work, which are devalued or erased in patriarchal institutions (including libraries) when performed by women. However, when men do those behaviors they are praised and rewarded. (Arellano Douglas and Gadsby 2017)

What we did
Empowered by our fellowship experience at the IMLS-funded Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (at Loyola Marymount University) and inspired by ongoing conversations on gender in the LIS field, we collaborated on a qualitative study using the methods below.
- Researched workplace and gender studies theory and consulted with experts
- Designed survey and research instrument with 40+ questions
- Researched workplace and gender studies theory and consulted with experts
- Applied successfully for grants to fund the associated transcription and analysis costs

What we found
Gender expression and the imperative to “fit in” at work
- Participants discussed pressures to distance themselves from what could be considered overly “gendered” or gender-normative appearances and behaviors, such as those related to pregnancy and motherhood at work.
  “A lot of the stuff comes back to motherhood for me... The only people who have commented in a negative way about me having a second child before being tenured are older women... I've had quite different older women say, 'Why would you do that before?' Like, you're an idiot. Don't do that.” - Roxanne

Gender identity & expression as a professional resource and as a professional hindrance
- Several spoke about how their gender helps them build connections with students, or the positive impact on students when they see librarians who are gender non-conforming or non-normative.
  "Being out (as trans) has been really beneficial for connecting with students. A lot of students who are just coming out feel really alone, and seeing someone who's an adult who's out is really a big deal. I know that it would've been for me. Generally, what happened is once the word gets out, I get a lot of students coming to me asking for resources about gender stuff and help talking to professors and so forth.” - Alex

Experiences in libraries as majority-women workplaces
- Some women and nonbinary participants discuss feeling there is more supportiveness, safety, sense of community and understanding in libraries as majority-women workplaces.
  "If I'm being honest I feel like my experiences of working in libraries is that most of the women I work around are like hyper productive and efficient... and then the men are not... I noticed that women, or nonbinary people or queer people, it's like the effort and the work gets exponentially more intense, like as the further you get away from white male.” - Lou

People with marginalized identities more reflective about actions tied to those identities
- Those not marginalized (especially cis and white folks) know intellectually that their identities impact work interactions, but have difficulty providing examples or describing specific behaviors.
  "I would say there is a culture of liberation, in my library workplace but it's not inclusive. I don't know if I would call it feminism because my definition of feminism is inclusive and intersectional. Sort of like, 'Racism is bad. I voted Democrat.' But that's as far as it goes often.” - Alex

Study Population Demographics

Limitations
These variables may influence our data in unknown ways.
1. We used a purposive sampling method instead of others (like snowball sampling, which might have resulted in a more diverse sample).
2. We didn’t foresee the need to explicitly ask participants questions about marital or potential status.
3. Some research argues that structured interviews are unnatural and restrictive, which then affects the quality of data we can collect from individuals.
4. Qualitative study results reveal the breadth and variety of related themes within a population, but are not necessarily generalizable.

We are completing our analysis and plan to publish our findings in 2018.

Who we thank
Charlie McNabb, Gender & Sexuality Studies Consultant
Claremont Colleges, Queer Resources Center
University of Southern California Libraries
Ohio State University Libraries

Who we read

How to ask
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