

2024

Bias and Whiteness in Public Services

Annie Bélanger

Grand Valley State University, belange1@gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/library_sp



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Bélanger, Annie, "Bias and Whiteness in Public Services" (2024). *Scholarly Papers and Articles*. 76.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/library_sp/76

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Papers and Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Column Title: Perspectives on Public Services

Column Editor: Annie Bélanger, Dean of University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA belange1@gvsu.edu

COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTES: This column examines advances in public-facing library services. The focus is on how broadly framed library services evolve and impact users as well as how diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, usability, and leadership advance service development. The column seeks to bring a broader viewpoint of public services as all services impacting users, beyond traditionally viewed public services such as instruction and education, programming, and circulation. The strength of the column is its broad, international focus and contributors are encouraged to explore issues and recent advances in public services relevant to their geographical region as well as the larger global audience. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor Annie Bélanger at belange1@gvsu.edu.

Contribution Title: Bias and Whiteness in Public Services

Contribution Authors: Annie Bélanger, Dean of University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA belange1@gvsu.edu

Abstract:

Race and gender bias intersect in particularly crucial way in Libraires as we experience them today with their roots in Victorian virtuous womanhood and an associated service ethic that requires library colleagues to prioritize user satisfaction even if at the cost of staff wellbeing, and at times, safety. This reality has led to an intertwining of identity, worth, and service ethic that is exacerbated through late stage capitalism that rewards business over impact and asks of us to want more.

On this basis, libraries have been ripe for critical review of our practices. As critical librarianship continues to grow, two concepts are gaining in attention within the field of libraries and public services: vocational awe and white centering. This column will explore how the concepts continue to rise in importance in this field as well as the interrelated field of customer service industry. Additionally, the author will explore micro-practices that are surfacing in the literature to decenter whiteness as well as ensure that we are values-centered rather than unsustainable in our practices.

Introduction

Race and gender bias intersect in particularly crucial way in Libraries as we experience them today with their roots in Victorian virtuous womanhood and an associated service ethic that requires library colleagues to prioritize user satisfaction even if at the cost of staff wellbeing, and at times, safety. This reality has led to an intertwining of identity, worth, and service ethic that is exacerbated through late stage capitalism that rewards business over impact and asks of us to want more.

On this basis, libraries have been ripe for critical review of our practices. As critical librarianship continues to grow, two concepts are continuing to rise in attention within the field of libraries and public services: vocational awe and white centering. This column will explore how the concepts continue to grow in importance in this field as well as the interrelated field of customer service industry. Additionally, the author will explore organizational practices and individual practices that are surfacing in the literature to decenter whiteness and seek to interrupt bias.

Author's Positionality Statement

While, arguably, these topics are North American centric, the concept of white supremacy culture is pervasive across the world as colonialism, past and present, reshaped reality for the world. The author herself is Québécoise and white, which in Canada is considered a micro-culture that has experienced prejudice. The author is currently living in the US as an immigrant, working as a senior library leader with faculty status. Her study of international development in a previous iteration of her career path, colonialism, and its deep impact on racialization to exert European dominance as well as late stage capitalism clear cutting our environment has informed her worldview. Her research agenda is also informed by her lived reality as a disabled leader in a profession that expects perfection from leaders as well as deeply held values of authenticity and equity.

Concepts and Principles

Vocational Awe

Fobazi Ettarh famously coined vocational awe in 2018. Ettarh established the following definition: "Vocational awe describes the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique."ⁱ In her seminal article, she sought to dismantle the concept that librarianship is a sacred calling.ⁱⁱ Since then, additional research works have surfaced on vocational awe. While these have largely focused on librarianship, the reality is that all service professions are grappling with similar concepts, particularly seen in nursing and teaching literatureⁱⁱⁱ. Arguably, front-facing service professionals, within and outside of libraries, are most likely to fall prey to vocational awe and its deleterious impacts of burnout, low morale, lowered level of workplace safety, and a lack of psychological safety. The reason for this is that those on the frontlines can witness in real time the challenges user, patients, and customers are facing, the disappointment or negative impact of an undesirable resolution.

Vocational awe exposes library workers, and other service workers, to exploitation^{iv} as any complaint can be turned back to a lack of dedication to your vocation. Anne Helen Petterson shares that "[a]we is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate

enough to serve without complaint.”^v Anne Helen Petterson shares that Kate Tuttle compares these professions to motherhood – expected to do it all without support or complaint while being ‘revered’.^{vi} Further, Farkas points out how damaging tying your sense of self to your job can be as you go through different stages of life.^{vii}

Additionally, the adage that “the customer is always right” has enabled active abuse by users and customers in some settings. Janice Gassam Asare shares in her recent book on “Decentering Whiteness in the Workplace” how this adage has perpetuated mistreatment of workers, particularly Black women.^{viii} Because customer service excellence is deeply steeped in vocational awe, libraries (and companies) rarely question practices that subjugate their workers to the customer’s whim. In this case, the vocational awe is centered in the practice rather than the person delivering customer service. Yet, the net impact is the same. It continues to leave customer service, hence public services, beyond critique. These are just the things we are expected to cope with while the reality of the pay is not aligned with the belief of essential staffing or the lack of recuperation time associated with public facing, front line roles.

Race as a Social Construct and Whiteness

Sociologists assert that race is a social construction, a concept that has no objective reality but rather is what people decide it is.^{ix} Race was constructed to have a minority, Europeans, hold control over others with a moral justification of superiority, and therefore inherent right to conquer and rule over others. In this way, race has indeed served as the “premier source of human identity”^x Race constructed the concept of whiteness and white as the norm and aspiration.

“Whiteness is a shifting status bestowed by those in power, intertwined with class relationships and the production of structural inequity.”^{xi} It is preferencing hegemony, including heterosexual, capitalist, and middle class.^{xii} I would also add that hegemony includes abled bodies as well. Because whiteness has been elevated, through colonialism, to have value, be valued, it comes with inherent advantages based on race in a world characterized by racial and ethnic inequality and injustice.

“The normativity of whiteness works insidiously, invisibly, to create binary categorizations of people as either acceptable to whiteness and therefore normal or different and therefore other.”^{xiii} It also means that those that fit the broader interpretation of whiteness are elevated. Those that are heterosexual, of the dominant religion, male, “well-to-do”, and abled will be seen as more valued, and therefore more deserving of excellent customer service.

Additionally, the library profession remains white dominated. Its sister profession, publishing, is also white dominated in both its workforce and its published voice. Higgins and Stark articulate that this reality continues to impact the information available to library users, the language used in library search systems, and more. Library customer service experience is inextricably linked to the information we make available and how it can be accessed. As white, European traits are

centered, then, even if inadvertent, racism occurs as people of colors are othered and less deserving of representation.^{xiv}

Management, Gender, and Race

In an update on Vocational Awe, Ettarh shares that libraries run on Taylorism, otherwise known as scientific management; though she argues that instead of efficiency we measure passion.^{xv} Whether measuring passion or efficiency, Taylorism is an incredibly white-centered, paternalistic, and capitalistic approach to management as it seeks to extract the most out of people. Taylorism emerged from US manufacturing during the industrial revolution. It saw workers as inherently interchangeable and in need of constant surveillance. Most importantly, Taylorism enabled the cultivation of 'white ignorance' by leading to "an identification of whiteness with management as being no cause for suspicion of anything out of the ordinary" (p212).^{xvi} Taylorism forms the basis of modern management practices, particularly within the areas of the Libraries that are process heavy. Insidiously, it centers whiteness in continuous improvement and efficiency projects.

While the literature is quick to point out how Taylorism raised whites as managers in the industrial complex, it needs to articulate that this is referring to white men specifically. When Taylorism was conceptualized, women were given menial work with significantly lower pay. It is around the same period that librarianship as we know it was created. Dewey chose women for their docile nature, their neat handwriting, and their low pay. To this day, while librarianship is referred to as a female profession, it remains a male dominated one with majority male leadership at the highest levels. In 2020, women accounted for more than 77.5% of the library technicians and assistants and more than 83% of the librarians.^{xvii} This gender imbalance means that it is more likely that customer service will be provided by women and led by men.

White Centering and Professionalism

There is significant bias that exists in the concept of 'professionalism.' Professionalism was used to differentiate classes within the British Empire as well as to elevate Europeans against newly freed African slaves in the US. Professionalism was used to reserve higher paying, more stable work for white and white-adjacent identities throughout the late 19th Century. Today, in North America and Europe, "professionalism has become coded language for white favoritism in workplace practices that more often than not privilege the values of white and Western employees and leave behind people of color."^{xviii}

Tema Okun, in her seminal work on White Supremacy Culture^{xix}, outlined the characteristics of white centered culture. These characteristics serve as a guidebook to professionalism, in particular the following: perfectionism, one right way, right to comfort and fear of conflict, quantity over quality, urgency, and written word^{xx}. In the workplace, and therefore libraries, professionalism, whether explicitly or implicitly, privileges whiteness and the norms associated with the middle-class.^{xxi} For a culture to privilege whiteness, it must discriminate against non-Western and non-white standards of professionalism.

Professionalism serves as the basis for the development of customer service protocols, dress codes, and more. There are multiple blog posts that reinforce the concept that professionalism is the core of customer service. The blog posts articulate that the customer is always right, an arc to the earlier mention of organizations tolerating abuse of their staff at times. They articulate the skills required, such as communications that are conscious of tone, language, and word use. Yet, there is little differentiation for the reality that there are micro-cultures where tone, language, and word use differ. Lastly, the blog posts reference efficiency and task clarity, a clear call back to the roots of current practices in Taylorism. Therefore, if professionalism is rooted in white supremacy and Western-Euro-centric approaches, then so is customer service. How might we uphold and celebrate diverse and inclusive approaches to customer service?

Customer Service, Bias, and Racism

Since customer service protocols are centered in professionalism, which in turn are centered in white supremacy culture, it should come as no surprise that discrimination, and therefore racism, is widespread in customer service delivery.^{xxii} Several studies¹ explored the lived experience of customers who held identities distanced from whiteness: people of color, disabled customers, lower income individuals, and more identities. The studies explored the existence of bias, how bias surfaced, the impact of bias, the perceptions of bias, and ways to mitigate bias in customer service.

Yet bias in customer service can be very difficult to identify. It often occurs as microaggressions, which can be subtle and less obvious to observers.^{xxiii} Microaggressions are “defined as subtle yet harmful forms of discriminatory behavior experience by members of oppressed groups.”^{xxiv} This is supported by Feldberg & Kim, who note that most studies have focused on a binary – service rendered or denied – yet they argue that customer service is much more nuanced and that the quality and depth of the service provided needs to be explored more fully.^{xxv} In their own studies, they found that front-line customer service representative treated customers inequitably, providing better quality service to white customers over Black and Asian customers.^{xxvi} These findings were further supported in a study by Giulietti et al that explored public services with a human component.^{xxvii} Giulietti et al found that public librarians provided inequitable service to email correspondents based on whether their names sounded white or not. If discrimination is occurring based on names in email, it is unlikely that discrimination is not occurring in person based on physical appearance.^{xxviii}

Additionally, we should not discount that those providing customer service can also be the recipients of discriminatory behaviors from customers. In her most recent book, Gassam Asare shares a story of her work as a bank teller when a white customer would routinely refuse for her to provide service, choosing to wait until a white teller was free.^{xxix} Dealing with racist customers is very difficult, especially considering the risk of escalation and angry outbursts.^{xxx}

¹ Studies have been done by 1) Bone, Christensen, Williams, Cross, and Dellande; 2) Feldberg & Kim; and 3) Cross, Dellande, and Bone to name a few.

Practices

In this section, the author will explore practices for the libraries and for individuals to leverage in decentering whiteness, mitigating bias, and handle racism within customer service. In acknowledgment that white supremacy culture is inherent and intertwined in our systems and processes, the author will start with organizational practices. It is also necessary to acknowledge that discrimination also occurs between individuals, either through ignorance or active prejudice, and as such, individual practices will be explored.

Decentering Whiteness in Customer Service

Earlier, the author articulated the interlinkages of whiteness, professionalism, and customer service standards. Since whiteness is a foundational thread for contemporary library practices, it must be decentered if services are to be inclusive. Cunningham states that “if we refuse to discuss whiteness, it will continue to function in unspoken ways to limit the effectiveness of our library work because ‘the qualities and traits deemed of high value in the workplace align with those in power’ but do not align well with the needs of the rest of us who are trying to work together to reduce oppression”.^{xxxix}

First, we must self-educate as library colleagues. This is most important for white colleagues and remains a need for many that have grown up in a white-dominated culture as there may be internalized white culture components to dismantle. The University of Buffalo’s Equity & Social Justice Advisory Group compiled [resources about whiteness and librarianship](#). To explore whiteness, after this self-education, the ladder of inference may be a helpful tool to unearth values and judgments that are embedded in our policies, which are leading us to have (inadvertently) exclusionary practices.

Bias and Racism in Customer Service Delivery

Feldberg and Kim provided the following suggestion for organizations to identify how and where bias is present in service delivery, going above and beyond, and in etiquette use during service by:

- Conducting survey or structure interviews with customers,
 - Consider asking questions about ease of access, roadblocks, how they think it compares to other customers, ways the service went above and beyond, and pleasantness of service. (Note that some markers of pleasantness are ableist in nature and will differ across cultures – this may introduce bias from customers about their customer service provider)
- Evaluating existing data [and review written interactions],
- Running experiments.^{xxxii}

A caveat on customer satisfaction self-reporting: Cross, Dellande, and Bone found that people of color (within a Euro-Centric context, such as the US) are so used to discrimination in service delivery that may not always recognize bad customer service; they have “become indifferent, desensitized, or even accepting” of this reality.^{xxxiii} Alternatively, Cunningham suggests that we

set universal targets, assess how they are being met, disaggregate the data in order to see which populations are not meeting these targets, and then put in place interventions.^{xxxiv}

Further, Feldberg and Tami provide three recommendations to mitigate bias and prejudice in the delivery of customer service:

- Increase the exposure to groups that your customer service representative is less familiar with to reduce bias and prejudice rooted in ignorance,
- Work to diversify your workforce,
- Standardize customer service interactions by creating formal protocols for delivery of customer service and specific language,
- Update training materials for cultural awareness; consider including tips such as the sounds of letters in other common languages for your customers, and
- Foster accountability amongst your customer service representatives by using metrics to detect bias and asking them to articulate their reasoning when deviating from common protocols.^{xxxv}

Lastly, they recommend that organizations not only define concretely what exceptional customer service is but go the extra step to also define equitable customer service [and associated competencies]. Greenwald argues that we also need to reduce discretion in the delivery of service and the application of policies to mitigate bias as discretion is based in judgment which is in turn shaped by our values, beliefs, and biases.^{xxxvi}

In addition to updating training materials as mentioned above, libraries need to ensure that their staff are expected and trained to deliver inclusive customer service. There are several layers needed:

1. Tonin stated that the biases that underlay inequitable customer service behavior may be unconscious, otherwise referred to as implicit bias.^{xxxvii} To begin to undo the harm of implicit bias, the first step is always to grow awareness. Once people are aware, by making the implicit explicit, then they can work on mitigating their bias.
2. Offer professional development opportunities for staff to learn more about other cultures and their norms as well as ways to develop greater emotional intelligence, a critical component of cultural humility.
3. Develop service competencies, associated metrics, and training modules to ensure that all staff are clear on the expectations of service quality, have tools to interact with a diverse set of users, and understand the consequences of acting on explicit bias.
4. Build expectations of inclusive customer service into hiring, annual reviews, and promotional processes.
5. Create policies and procedures that minimize the insertion of bias, and therefore, minimize the risk of discrimination.^{xxxviii}

Handling Bias and Racism Towards Those Providing Customer Service

The most important change in practice is for a library to do away with the adage that the customer is always right. As discussed earlier, this adage enables abusive customer behaviors. Libraries must balance the expectation of

Okeke offers the following tips for handling racist customers, which apply to any time a customer is acting in a discriminatory manner:

- “Remain calm & professional”^{xxix}: which is described as remaining calm and composed, avoiding retorts and rude comments.
- “Draw a clear line”^{xl}: which is described as a cold, stone-faced look, avoiding smiles or being nice about the inappropriate comments.
 - Okeke offers that following scripts “Sir/Ma’am, I would really love to assist you, but I cannot do so if you continue to make such comments” OR “I would be happy to help you get this done, provided you don’t make further negative remarks about me/my colleague/our customer, if you choose to continue, I will have to ask you to leave”^{xli}
- If they continue, ask them to come back another time when they can conduct themselves with respect.^{xlii}
- If they become aggressive, you can call security or the local police.^{xliii}

Conclusion

If libraries are to uphold their professional values of access to information, diversity, and service, we must critically examine our practices from the macro level to the micro level. Individual and organizational changes are required to reduce actions driven by bias and its negative impacts. In parallel, we need to acknowledge that we are inherently part of larger systemic issues that are beyond our level of agency and authority.

References

AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees. Library Professionals: Facts & Figures: 2023 Fact Sheet. Website, April 16, 2023. <https://www.dpeaflcio.org/factsheets/library-professionals-facts-and-figures>

Berger, Peter L. & Thomas Luckmann. “The Social Construction of Reality.” 1963, New York, NY: Doubleday.

Bone, Sterling A., Glenn L. Christensen, Jerome D. Williams, Samantha N. N. Cross, and Stephanie Dellande. “Moving beyond Perceptions: Examining Service Disparities among

Consumers". *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 8(1), January 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/722689>

Cross, Samantha N. N., Stephanie Dellande, and Sterling Bone. "People of color get so used to discrimination in stores they don't always notice bad customer service." *The Conversation*, May 9, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/people-of-color-get-so-used-to-discrimination-in-stores-they-dont-always-notice-bad-customer-service-201766>

Cunningham, April. "Working in Library Access Services."
<https://pressbooks.pub/libraryaccessservices/>

Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." In *The Library With A Lead Pipe*; January 10, 2018.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>

Ettarh, Fobazi & Chris Vidas. "The Future of Libraries: Vocational Awe in a "Post-COVID" World," *The Serials Librarian*, 82:1-4, 2022, pg. 17-22, DOI: 10.1080/0361526X.2022.2028501

Farkas, Meredith. "Vocational Awe is always harmful." *Information Wants to Be Free Blog*, December 22, 2022. <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2022/12/22/vocational-awe-is-always-harmful/>.

Feldberg, Alexandra C. & Tami Kim. "Racism in Customer Service." *Behavioral Scientist*, Business Blog, April 30, 2018. <https://behavioralscientist.org/racism-in-customer-service/>.

Feldberg, Alexandra C. & Tami Kim. "Fighting Bias on the Front Lines: Learn to detect subtle discrimination in your customer service." *Harvard Business Review Magazine*, November-December 2021. Accessed online at: <https://hbr.org/2021/11/fighting-bias-on-the-front-lines>.

Friedlaender, C. (2018). On Microaggressions: Cumulative Harm and Individual Responsibility. *Hypatia*, 33(1), 5-21. doi:10.1111/hypa.12390

Galvan, Angela. "Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship." In *The Library With A Lead Pipe*; June 3, 2015.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/>.

Gassam Asare, Janice. "Decentering Whiteness in the Workplace." 2023. Penguin Random House

Giulietti, Corrado, Mirco Tonin, Michael Vlassopoulos, Racial Discrimination in Local Public Services: A Field Experiment in the United States, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Volume 17, Issue 1, February 2019, Pages 165–204, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx045>

Gray, Aysa. "The Bias of 'Professionalism' Standards." Stanford Social Innovation Review, June 4, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.48558/TDWC-4756>.

Hathcock, April. "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS." In The Library With A Lead Pipe; October 7, 2015. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>.

Higgins, Molly, and Rachel Keiko Stark. "Mitigating Implicit Bias: Diversity, equity, and inclusion in action." American Libraries Magazine, January 4, 2021. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2021/01/04/mitigating-implicit-bias/>

Mason, Betsy. "Making people aware of their implicit biases doesn't usually change minds. But here's what does work." Knowable Magazine, PBS, June 10, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/making-people-aware-of-their-implicit-biases-doesnt-usually-change-minds-but-heres-what-does-work>

McQuarrie, Fiona. "Vocational Awe." All About Work Blog; December 19, 2022. <https://allaboutwork.org/2022/12/19/vocational-awe/>

Misra, Tanvi. "Is Your Librarian Racist?" CityLab Blog, Bloomberg, January 11, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-11/librarians-have-an-implicit-bias-problem-too>

Okeke, Kelechi. "Tips on How to Handle Racist Customers." CXService 360 Blog, August 17, 2017. <https://www.cxservice360.com/tips-on-how-to-handle-racist-customers/>.

Okun, Tema. "white supremacy culture", 1999. https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf.

Okun, Tema. "Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture." White Supremacy Culture website; Last updated August 2023. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

Okun, Tema. "What is White Supremacy Culture?" White Supremacy Culture website; Last updated August, 2023a. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/what-is-it.html>

Petersen, Helen. "Vocational awe." Culture Study Blog; September 6, 2020. <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/vocational-awe>

Roediger, David R. and Elizabeth D Esch. "The Production of Difference: Race and Management of Labor in US History." Oxford University Press, 2014.

Smedley, Audrey. ““Race” and the construction of human identity.” *American Anthropologist*, 100, 1998, 690–702.

-
- i Ettarh, 2018.
ii Ibid.
iii McQuarrie, 2022.
iv Petersen, 2020.
v ibid
vi Ibid
vii Farkas, 2022.
viii Gassam Asare, 2023.
ix Berger & Luckmann, 1963.
x Smedley, 1998, p 690.
xi Galvan, 2015.
xii Ibid.
xiii Hatchcock, 2015.
xiv Higgins & Stark, 2021.
xv Ettarh & Vidas, 2022.
xvi Roediger & Esch, 2014, p 212.
xvii Department For Professional Employees, 2023.
xviii Gray, 2019.
xix Okun, 1999.
xx Okun, 2023.
xxi Okun, 2023a.
xxii Feldberg & Kim, 2018.
xxiii Cross, Dellande, and Bone, 2023.
xxiv Friedlaender, 2020.
xxv Ibid.
xxvi Ibid.
xxvii Giulietti, Tonin, and Vlassopoulos, 2019.
xxviii Misra, 2018.
xxix Gassam Asare, ibid.
xxx Okeke, 2017.
xxxi Swade & Bekele, 2023, p.199 as cited in Cunningham, chapter 7, 2023.
xxxii Feldberg & Kim, 2021.
xxxiii Cross, Dellande, and Bone, ibid.
xxxiv Cunningham, ibid.
xxxv Ibid.
xxxvi Mason, 2020.
xxxvii Misra, ibid.
xxxviii Cunningham, ibid.
xxxix Okeke, ibid.
xl Ibid.
xli Ibid.
xlii Ibid.
xliii Ibid.