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**Customer Service, Hard Work, and Normativity: Identity Standards Encoded into Public Library Routines**

**Abstract.** Routines are a defining feature of the library workplace. While these routines can improve efficiency and keep libraries from needing to constantly reinvent the wheel, they can also introduce inequities that negatively impact library staff based on components of their identity. In this study, ten staff members from public libraries in America recorded a total of 50 audio diaries about their experiences in routine work. Analysis revealed the nature and source of identity standards encoded into library routines, how discrepancies in these standards are introduced, and what staff do to work around those discrepancies. Findings suggest that certain staff are more susceptible to these challenges, including staff of color, LGBTQIA+ staff, staff with mental illnesses, and staff with chronic pain. Yet, staff also employed their creative agency as they devised ways to work around problematic routines. This study contributes to research on routine dynamics and has implications for the continued promotion of equity, diversity, and inclusion in public libraries.

**Keywords:** Routine dynamics, public library staff, identity control theory.

1. Introduction

Though the workplace can represent a source of fulfillment and rewards, it can also represent a potential *nexus point* for social oppression, introducing more barriers for certain workers than others (Blustein, 2008, p. 231). Simply because of who they are, many workers face barriers that make it difficult to enter, stay, succeed, and advance in the workplace, and their skills and expertise are often severely underutilized (Fassinger, 2008). Libraries, in particular, continue to be “deeply racialized spaces where race-conscious motives, practices, and policies are inevitably enacted” (Hall, 2012, p. 197). As a result, staff who do not meet certain white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, or hyper-able criteria can face significant barriers (Hathcock, 2015).

Many of these barriers are hidden within library routines and the expectations placed on staff who engage in these routines—expectations that are often grounded in simplistic and normative evaluations of a staff member’s individual and group identities based on visual and immediately accessible characteristics (Fiske, 1993). This means that, while routines suggest what library staff should *do* during a routine, they also suggest who library staff should *be.* This can be seen when routines are more rigidly prescribed for BIPOC staff (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2010), leading to a devaluation of their skills that can cause them to doubt their professional worth (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014). It can be seen in the microaggressions encoded into routines that subject staff to constant questioning about where they are really from (Mody et al., 2018), assume lower levels of intelligence by spelling out simple words for Black staff (Hall, 2012), or define the work of a staff member by visual elements of their identity, e.g., the expectation to work like a *gay librarian* (Philips, 2011). It can also be seen when routines lack necessary accommodations for staff with disabilities, suggesting that they need to complete the routine as if they had no disability. The resulting frustration and burnout are contributing to high rates of attrition among minoritized staff (Hathcock, 2015).

To uncover more about the identity standards encoded into routines, the effects of these standards, and what staff do in response, the current study asked ten public library staff to maintain an audio diary based on their experiences in routine work. While findings suggest the presence of multiple problematic routines, they also reveal the creative agency of staff as they develop and implement workarounds. This study represents an important contribution to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) research within libraries, because while routines are often perceived as immovable and immutable, they can also function as a significant source of change (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

1. Literature Review
   1. Routine Dynamics

The current study is grounded in practice theory and the study of routine dynamics. Practice theory considers what people do, how what they do creates and recreates institutional and social structures, and how those structures go on to influence future action (Feldman et al., 2021). Rather than seeing agency and structure as separate, practice theory sees them as mutually constituted such that “some of the key properties of each [are] effects of the other” (Wendt, 1987, p. 339). In practice, this means that people have opportunities to push back against and change the structure. The study of routine dynamics considers routines as one particular type of practice, distinct from other practices because they represent task-oriented behaviors that occur in particular sequences (Feldman et al., 2021). This sequence becomes familiar to people as the routine is repeated, and there are often attempts to improve the sequence to achieve certain outcomes. Routines can help to simplify complex work, avoid reinventing the wheel each time an action is performed, and circumvent continuous infighting about how work should proceed (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Yet, Feldman and Pentland (2022) note that routines can also work to “perpetuate privilege and oppression” (p. 849).

Routines are comprised of ostensive and performative elements. The ostensive elements of a routine outline the abstract blueprints, recipes, or templates for work behavior (Becker, 2004; Felin & Foss, 2009). This represents the structure of a routine, or its *patterning* (D’Adderio, 2014), which consists of a worker’s embodied and cognitive understanding of "abstract regularities and expectations” in the workplace (Pentland & Feldman, 2008, p. 241). But, while the ostensive elements outline the general blueprints, they are never detailed enough to specify exact behavior (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Instead, these details are worked out in the performance of a routine. Workers express their agency as they interpret and apply the ostensive elements through routine performance, always introducing some variation from those ostensive elements. In this way, the performance of a routine is like a musical performance (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). While the musical score outlines how the music should be played, there is always some variability in each musician’s performance of that score.

The performative element of routine work suggests that workers do not mindlessly and robotically follow ostensive routines. Rather, routine performance represents an “effortful” activity (Pentland & Reuter, 1994, p. 488). When routine performance fails to produce the intended outcome, creates new problems, enables new opportunities, or suggests the need for improvements (Feldman, 2000), workers have an opportunity to change their performance of the routine in response: “Repetition introduces opportunities for changes that overcome minor or temporary obstacles but also introduces opportunities to do the routine differently or better” (Feldman et al., 2023, p. 7). These workarounds are “goal-driven adaptations, improvisations, or other activities that attempt to bypass or overcome obstacles or exceptions” in a routine (Alter, 2014, p. 5). Over time, these variations in performance can change the ostensive blueprints themselves, i.e., change the musical score.

* 1. Identity and Routines

The current study seeks to provide a framework researchers can use to more fully consider issues of identity, power, privilege, and oppression embedded in routines. Identity has become a staple concern in the study of organizations (Brown, 2019). In the context of routines, standards for a worker’s identity are encoded into a routine’s ostensive elements. This means that routines establish expectations, not only for what a worker should do but also for who they should be as they perform the routine. Identity control theory (ICT) suggests three main identity types that can be encoded into these routines (Stets & Burke, 2005). The group standard references who a worker is as a member of a social group. The role standard references who a worker is as someone in a specific role or with a certain job description. Personal standards reference who a worker is as a “biographically and existentially separate and perhaps even unique human being” (Hewitt, 1989, p. 189).

These standards mean different things to different actors in the work system. Meanings originating from the self represent *ideal* standards that a person aspires to maintain, while meanings originating from others represent *ought* standards a person feels obligated to maintain (Higgins, 1987; Stets & Burke, 2005). According to ICT, a worker compares the salient identity standard with the identities they perceive in a routine’s performance. Something in the performance of a worker or other actor can invalidate either an ought or ideal standard. For instance, a worker’s mistakes can invalidate management standards for quality, or rule enforcement from management can invalidate a worker’s own standards for autonomy. These discrepancies trigger “an error signal that both generates emotion and produces meaningful behavior or activity that changes meanings in the situation so that the error is reduced and the perceptions match the standard” (Stets & Burke, 2005, p. 3).

Workers attempt to resolve discrepancies in identity standards using workarounds, which function as a type of identity work— “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). The goal of identity work is typically to secure a positive, valuable, good, or beneficial self-image, and behaviors range from accepting or complying with how one is perceived by others to resisting or redefining those perceptions to be more in line with one’s self-perception (Brown, 2019). For instance, Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) found that workers experiencing bullying engaged in identity work to account for disruptions to their sense of identity. Behaviors included changing how they work, efforts to repair reputational damage, and attempts to convince others of the truthfulness of their story. Brown & Lewis (2011) found that lawyers engaged in timekeeping and billing routines could realize their ideal identities as productive legal professionals by accepting the influence of disciplinary processes on their performance.

Informed by this research in routine dynamics and identity, the current research asks the following research questions:

* RQ1: What identity standards for staff are encoded into the ostensive element of public library routines?
* RQ2: How does the routine performance of a system actor introduce perceived discrepancies in identity standards?
* RQ3: What do library staff do to resolve perceived discrepancies in identity standards?
* RQ4: What effect do the workarounds of staff have on perceived discrepancies?

1. Methods
   1. Study Design

A defining feature of routine dynamics is the assertion that workers are active and intentional in constructing their work environments *in situ* (Lopez-Cotarelo, 2021). Yet, traditional organizational research methods, like retrospective surveys and interviews, tend to situate the research outside of this construction by asking participants to reflect on a past event. As a result, a participant’s construction of meaning is often based on plausible rather than accurate remembering (Rausch, 2013). Diary methods have increasingly been adopted in organizational research to counteract these challenges (Ohly, et al., 2010; van Eerde, Holman, & Totterdell, 2005), because they place data collection closer to the phenomenon under study, i.e., to “life as it is lived” (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 597). In an audio diary, participants are asked to record themselves speaking rather than writing journal entries. Recording enables a more immediate and fluid response that is better equipped than written diaries to capture a participant’s thoughts on stressful experiences (Crozier & Cassell, 2016). Audio diaries have several other advantages over traditional written diaries, including richer insight into a participant’s sense-making process (Monrouxe, 2009) and reduced burden on participants (Markham & Couldry, 2007).

* 1. Sample

Public library staff were recruited from libraries in the Southeastern United States. To recruit, researchers asked libraries to distribute a flyer about the research and attended staff meetings in person at several sites. Participants who expressed interest through an online form then met with the researchers through Zoom for a more in-depth overview of the study and its requirements. This was done to increase informed consent and decrease attrition, with the assumption that knowing more about the expectations would make participants more likely to stay for the duration of the study. The sample population included ten staff, who each completed a demographics survey to capture elements of their self-described identity (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Self-described identities of study participants, aggregated.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Race** | **Sexuality** | **Gender** | **Disability** | **Mental or Other Disorder** |
| White (N=6) | Heterosexual or straight (N=4) | Woman (N=8) | Chronic pain (N=2) | Anxiety (N=4) |
| Black (N=4) | Queer (N=2) | Man (N=1) | Seizure disorder (N=1) | Depression (N=2) |
|  | Gay (N=1) | Nonbinary (N=1) | Heart condition (N=1) | Obsessive-compulsive disorder (N=1) |
|  | Bisexual (N=2) |  | Scoliosis (N=1) | Autism (N=1) |
|  | Biromantic asexual (N=1) |  | Asthma (N=1) |  |
|  | Pansexual (N=1) |  |  |  |

* 1. Process

Following a detailed set of prompts, each participant recorded five separate diaries of their routine experiences over the course of five different days. Participants were encouraged to record entries immediately after engaging in a routine task, but since participants may not have the time or space to record these at work, they were given the option of recording them at the end of the day. Recordings were completed on the participant’s cell phone, and each participant was provided with their own cloud-based folder to submit recordings to the research team. Participants were informed that they were in complete control of the diary entries, including the specific things they talk about and whether they would send certain diaries to the research team. Diaries were transcribed and uploaded to Nvivo for analysis.

* 1. Analysis

The units of analysis in the study were the 50 individual routines, and template analysis was used to group these routines into types. Template analysis is commonly used in organizational research, and in diary research in particular (Pilbeam et al., 2016; Poppleton, Briner, & Kiefer, 2008), and involves the creation of a list of hierarchically ordered codes that account for themes emerging from a detailed reading of transcripts (King, 2012). Participants discussed their experiences in several common library routines (Table 2). These routines were then grouped according to the system actor depicted as the source of the identity standard and the system actor whose performance was perceived as introducing a discrepancy with the standard. Once the routines were grouped according to type, a secondary analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the type of identity standard, the nature of the performance discrepancy, what participants did to work around those discrepancies, and the extent to which those workarounds resolved the discrepancies.

**Table 2.** Routines described by participants.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Type** | **Examples** |
| Collections maintenance | Shelf reading, weeding materials, processing book deliveries |
| Customer service | “Working the floor” and responding to patron inquiries and requests, reader’s advisory, drive-through, front desk, enforcing code of conduct |
| Programming | Designing and implementing programs for specific patron groups, e.g., storytime, summer reading |
| Displays | Selecting and arranging materials for display, book bundling |
| Administrative | Clerical work, e.g., balancing the cash drawer, HR paperwork, purchasing and budgeting, library statistics |
| Opening/closing | Opening and closing the library to the public |
|  |  |

1. Findings
   1. Identity Standards (RQ1)

**Customer Service Role.** The most common standard concerned a participant’s role as a member of library staff, and working in a library meant providing excellent customer service. Kayla noted the standards of older patrons as they worked with library technology: “I know that someone's getting frustrated at me when they end up, like, snapping their fingers to get my attention.” Riley suggested that patrons could base this standard on their own political beliefs, noting a patron’s comments during his floor routine: “[The patron] just looked at me and was like, ‘Y’all are really pushing that LGBTQ-whatever agenda, huh? With all these books?’ . . . and she said, ‘Well, it just all over [and] I just don't appreciate y'all indoctrinating my children.’” Ashley noted that management standards for customer service extended even to her behavior outside of work: “I feel like our expectation is to be good representatives of the library even when we're not on work hours at that point.” Megan’s own ideal role standard centered around a sense of obligation to younger patrons: “While these kids are not my biological children, they're still my kids. . . it feels really personal to me when something is going on with them and I feel sort of an obligation to try and fix it.”

**Hard Worker.** Personal standards often meant that a participant was a uniquely hard worker, going beyond the requirements of their specific role. Megan’s ideal standard meant perfection: “I had meant to get to the library at 7:30 just so I could make sure that everything was perfect.” In yearly self-evaluations, management asked Marie to prove how she went above and beyond her role standards: “It was, like, oh, you can only be outstanding by going way, way above and beyond your job duties, which doesn't really make a lot of sense to me . . . I think if you’re doing your work at a hundred percent, then that should be the top rating and you shouldn't necessarily have to go above and beyond your workload.” Colleagues expected Riley to help them with their work, in addition to his own: “I had people coming into the workroom saying, ‘Hey, can you come help us with this?’ Or I would be getting some awkward looks from my coworkers who were checking in a whole bunch of books.”

**Normal**. Patrons were depicted as having few personal standards for participants, instead expecting participants to cover their unique personal identities with normativity as defined by their role standards. Lexi noted a patron’s expectations for her physical appearance: “He kept being like, ‘I can't understand you because you're wearing that mask.’ And then he said something along the lines of like, ‘the mask, the hair, the dress. Are you just trying to stand out?’” Similarly, a patron appeared to question Jasmin’s professionalism because of the clothes they wore: “I think I'm allowed to wear what I wanna wear and still be as competent as I was in a dress or in jeans.”

**Advocate**. Group standards could mean being an advocate for that group. Riley, a gay man, noted this about his own ideal standard: “[I wear] so much paraphernalia that basically says, ‘I am here to support any of the gay people.’” Clara, who identifies as queer, noted the expectation of management and colleagues that she work on the library’s display for PRIDE month: “I also felt like if I said no, it would be hypocritical . . . like, everyone knows what I stand for at the library, so what would it look like if I said no to doing a PRIDE display?”

**Punching Bag**. Patrons seemed to justify their abusive behavior based on a participant’s group identity. Jasmin felt that a patron’s abusive behavior was due to the perception that they were a woman: “At no point did [the patron] get loud and belligerent with safety, but whenever he spoke to me and my partner who were short women, he immediately got louder.” Amanda noted that male patrons could see female staff as accepting of their advances: “My manager, for example, does not have to worry about that happening to him when he gets the book drop. He’s a man, so random men are not gonna come up to him and follow him around and hit on him.”

* 1. Discrepancies (RQ2)

**Bodies**. Elements of a participant’s physical body could introduce performance discrepancies. Jasmin’s visible Black identity seemed to invalidate a patron’s standard for library staff: “After I had given the customer the information, she looked at me and just immediately sidestepped over to speak with my partner who . . . just happened to be a white male . . . and then asked him the exact same question [laugh].” Riley’s visible identity as a gay man disconfirmed patron standards for librarians:

“I have to be defensive around families, especially some of our homeschooled kids or more conservative families. I got this weird feeling of, like, because I am male in an improperly stereotypically female position, and also because I am gay, there's a lot of assumptions or looks that I get in this profession.”

Megan’s chronic pain from endometriosis made it difficult to meet colleague standards for a *peppy* children’s librarian: “To put it gently, I felt like I was being stabbed while I was standing up.”

**Anxiety**. A participant’s anxiety could lead to performance discrepancies. Although Stephanie knew how to fulfill her role in making room reservations for patrons, her anxiety made her doubt her ability: “I get nervous that I don’t know how to do it, like, fully or the best.” This led to a discrepancy with her ideal standard: “Although I knew what to do, for whatever reason I was just like, ‘What do I do?’ And so, I immediately just defer to [a manager].” Marie’s anxiety made it difficult for her to enforce the library’s code of conduct, which meant difficulty fulfilling management standards: “I do have a little bit of anxiety. I have a hard time, you know, talking to customers about things that they're doing wrong [laugh].”

**Ostensive Design**. Participants felt that the ostensive design of a routine could introduce discrepancies. Management’s design of the workload made it difficult for Ashley to fulfill a patron’s customer service standard:

“The way that things are set up here is that all of these tasks get shifted to the

person in the drive-through . . . something as simple as putting books on hold for a customer shouldn't take that much time or shouldn't take long, but [it does] because I'm doing three or four things at a time.”

The library board’s new and cumbersome processes for the display routine made it difficult for Clara to meet management and colleague standards for completing the PRIDE display: “They have never been that interested in what we do for displays until now. All they've done lately is just make it harder for us to do displays.”

**Overreliance.** The reliance of management and colleagues on participants could introduce a discrepancy. The expectation from management and colleagues that Clara would work on the PRIDE display introduced a discrepancy with Clara’s ideal standard:

“I like this job. I don't want to get fired . . . I'm [also] not out to my family because they're homophobic. So, the thought goes through my mind like, what if I do this display request and somehow either it's rejected, or it's not rejected, and I do the display and that ends up in the news with my name attached to it.”

A colleague interrupted Ashley’s front desk routine: “I was still helping [a customer] with [scanning], but [my colleague] saw me at the desk. So, she tried to grab my attention and said, ‘Well, hey, since you're back at the desk, I don't know what I'm doing. Can you help me on my computer?’”

**Disrespectful Behavior**. When patrons behaved in a way participants felt was inappropriate, it forced participants to choose between invalidating patron or ideal standards. A patron asked Stephanie if she was married: “For context, he is 62 years old, and I am 22 years old. I am not married; however, I felt very uncomfortable when he asked me that question.” Although Jasmin’s physical appearance made it “obvious that I am some flavor of queer,” a patron asked them for help finding a group for men against gay aggression: “I am a non-binary person. My partner who was on the desk at the time is also queer, and it was very weird . . . this one felt kind of gross.”

* 1. Workarounds (RQ3)

**Subtractive**. In subtractive workarounds, participants removed, restricted, or hid something about their own performance in an effort to resolve a discrepancy. Riley concealed his gay identity to avoid disconfirming patron standards: “I feel myself putting more of a mask on and trying not to help or be as enthusiastic. . . I have to kind of diminish myself to do a lot of work with families.” Megan hid her physical pain to meet colleague and management standards for being a *peppy* children’s librarian: “I had to keep my face from twisting in pain . . . I call it putting on my second face.”

*Outcomes*. Subtractive workarounds typically validated the standards of others, while invalidating a participant’s own standards—eliciting negative emotions. Though Riley wanted to “be an example of queer joy,” his masking of that identity made him feel small: “I feel myself, like, shrink a bit to try and let them have a space in the library. I feel a little defeated talking to them . . . I get depressed [laugh].” Megan’s masking led to exhaustion: “While I was successful in making it through the patron interactions, it really kind of took a toll on me throughout the day.” Yet, subtractive workarounds aligned with Marie’s ideal standard: “I will put myself out, you know, kind of relinquish what I need sometimes for other people . . . I don't have a problem with that.”

**Additive**. In additive workarounds, participants added to their performance in an effort to resolve a discrepancy. This could mean increased effort, as noted by Tara’s efforts to avoid invalidating patron customer service standards: “I just try to fit in those additional responsibilities. I just have to kind of turn on the gears in my brain that allow me to do that task successfully.” When management behavior threatened her ability to meet management’s own standards, Ashley prepared herself for a heavier workload: “I just need to mentally prepare myself that I might have a little bit extra work left behind.” Participants also added resolve, as noted by Amanda’s attempts to *muddle through* a discrepancy in her ideal standards rather than directly resolve it: “I've never heard of any other staff members having an issue with it, so I’ve always just put up with it and figured it was just me.”

*Outcomes.* While additive workarounds could resolve discrepancies in one standard, they could also introduce new discrepancies in another. For instance, Kayla’s decision to push through resource limitations and continue helping older patrons invalidated patron standards for her availability: “I know a lot of people who need [help] and they don't ask, because they feel like they'd be inconveniencing us.” Tara invalidated patron customer service standards despite her increased effort: “Some of the books came out a day or two after they were supposed to be released.”

**Reframing**. In reframing workarounds, participants shifted their focus from resolving a discrepancy to resolving the cognitive dissonance caused by the discrepancy. Jasmin tried to rationalize a patron’s rude behavior: “I also kind of feel like this was a circumstance where someone was trying to get a job and jobs are important.” When Megan’s anxiety threatened her ideal standard, she shifted her temporal focus to the present: “I did take a 15-minute break just to recenter myself, you know, use some mindfulness tactics, because as much as I think they sound really lame [laugh], they do work.” Tara shifted her temporal focus to future performances: “I just had to use it as a learning opportunity. . . I've definitely kind of taken some time to think about how things could have been done differently.”

*Outcomes.* While reframing typically did not resolve the discrepancy, it did help participants resolve the dissonance the discrepancy caused. For instance, it could suggest that the discrepancy was not caused by a participant’s own inability to meet a standard, but rather by some other external factor. By planning for the future, participants were able to continue seeing themselves as high performers. Yet, focusing on the present did improve Megan’s performance in a way that removed the discrepancy: “This was a lot more successful than I had thought it would be, because I was able to sort of reorient myself and, you know, gather my social battery a little bit more.”

**Outward Change.** In outward change workarounds, participants directed their change efforts at other system actors. When a patron’s uncomfortable questions threatened her ideal standard, Clara told the patron to stop: “I told him multiple times, like, ‘Oh, I'm sorry I don't answer personal questions at work, but I am happy to help you with your library business.’” Tara asked a colleague to stop their work to help her: “It was extremely helpful for another staff member to step in and offer to give the new employee a tour of the building.” Lexi pushed back against the routine itself: “The way I handled the obstacle was to just put it away and to stop doing the task.”

*Outcomes.* Outward change workarounds were limited, because successful resolution depended on another system actor’s performance. For instance, the patron simply ignored Stephanie’s efforts: “He said, ‘I want to apologize for asking if you were married the other day’ . . . and then he said, ‘I would've asked you out, but you probably are married or something.’ And again, this made me very uncomfortable.” When a patron followed Jasmin to their car, colleagues ignored their looks for help: “I felt a little abandoned by my coworkers, because they kept going to their cars. . . they just kinda looked and went to their own vehicles while someone verbally accosted me.” Trying to change other actors could also introduce new discrepancies, as Kayla noted with her efforts to get colleagues to adopt a new system that better fit her processing disorder: “It seems no matter how often I try to explain to people that it's not me having OCD, that it's not me being super controlling, that I literally need it put this way to efficiently function, [I can’t].”

1. Discussion
   1. Theoretical Takeaways

The current study contributes to the study of routine dynamics by answering Feldman and Pentland’s (2022) call to move beyond a routine’s ability to produce goods and services to a consideration of the ways in which routines “reproduce[s] patterns of social equality and inequality” (p. 846). Findings suggest that the inequality in routines is due, in part, to the tendency of a routine’s ostensive components to center around standards for a worker’s identity. Failure to conform to these standards can represent significant challenges and discomfort for library staff (Cooke, 2017) and may help explain why library staff often feel it necessary to “hide parts of themselves to remain viable in their careers” (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2021). Yet, findings also suggest that these inequities are hidden within ostensive expectations for customer service and hard work. Because these expectations are not explicitly based on identity, it can make it seem like the routine is equitable—even when inequities are revealed in performance. These findings support Diamond and Lewis’ (2019) findings about racial discrimination embedded in school disciplinary routines. Although the routine was discriminatory in practice, the ostensive components of the routine were not explicitly discriminatory, hiding the routine’s actual discriminatory effects.

* 1. Practical Takeaways

**Customer Service.** The presence of customer service standards in the current study aligns with the reality that librarianship is a customer-facing service profession (Cronin & Martin, 1983; Miao & Bassham, 2007). Libraries are facing increasing competitive pressure to adopt a *customer value mandate* that distinguishes them from other information organizations (Weinstein & McFarlane, 2016). Many libraries have even shifted from a focus on *patrons* to a focus on *customers* (Pundsack, 2015). LiQUAL+, a customer satisfaction instrument used in academic libraries, is underpinned by the assumption that “only customers judge quality; all other judgments are essentially irrelevant” (Zeithami, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990, cited in Thompson, Kyrillidou, & Cook, 2003). Yet, findings suggest the need to consider more fully the impact of a customer-centric focus on library staff. For instance, the finding that patrons appeared to define staff, not as unique people, but as workers there to serve their interests, is indicative of an *entitlement* attitude. Here, a patron expects that they are inherently deserving of “special treatment and automatic compliance with his or her expectations” without doing anything to earn it (Boyd & Helms, 2005, p. 274). The behaviors of these entitled patrons can lead to negative affect, burnout, and feelings of dehumanization (Fisk & Neville, 2011). The tendency of management to also define staff by their service to customers highlights the role of management in conferring a “social legitimacy and a sense of inevitability” to a patron’s abuse of staff (Wang, 2016, p. 270).

**Vocational Awe.** Hard work featured prominently in the current study’s findings, as participants were defined as hard workers and often engaged in workarounds that increased the intensity of their work—e.g., masking, muddling through, increasing effort. And while this may be seen as a necessary expectation in any workplace, hard work in libraries must be considered through the lens of vocational awe. Vocational awe refers to a belief among library workers that, because of the commendable things a library does, libraries are “inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh, 2018). A participant’s acceptance of customer service standards, often at the expense of their own, may be influenced by a belief that librarians are *priests* and *saviors* whose self-sacrifice supports the communities in which they work (Ettarh, 2018). Staff may feel the need to push down their personal identities to meet the standards of *the calling*. One potential consequence of vocational awe is that it can suggest to staff that efforts to prioritize their ideal standards—e.g., abandoning the routine, taking a break, looking to someone else for help—are selfish and represent an abandonment of the call. This can lead to burnout, acceptance of less pay, job creep, and a privileging of the status quo (Ettarh, 2018).

**Contextual Supports.** Findings also suggest opportunities for libraries to better support staff through the proactive development of contextual supports. These supports include formal policies and practices that support equality and signal “the types of behaviors that are acceptable and expected;” a supportive climate that affords psychological safety, positive social interactions, and freedom to express one’s true self; and relationships that offer empathy and support (Webster et al., 2018, p. 195). In the context of the current study, supports may involve eliminating the need for certain workarounds. For instance, a policy on mandatory mental health days may shift a worker’s reliance on merely pushing through after experiencing traumatic discrepancies. Changes to workplace culture that increase opportunities for a staff member’s cultural and self-expression can reduce reliance on masking. Inviting patrons to get to know staff as unique individuals could decrease entitlement, as it is likely easier for patrons to feel entitled to a faceless job role than to a unique person. Supports may also involve supporting staff efforts to engage in certain workarounds. For instance, libraries can provide staff with tools for resolving cognitive discrepancies in healthy ways. Libraries can also help staff build skills for effectively pushing back and prioritizing their ideal standards, while also giving them opportunities to validate those standards.

1. Conclusion

Routines are a defining feature of the library workplace. And while these routines can improve efficiency and keep libraries from needing to constantly reinvent the wheel, they can also introduce inequities that negatively impact workers based on components of their identity. Through an analysis of 50 audio diaries from ten public library staff, the current study considered the presence of identity standards in the routine work of public library staff. Findings show that staff are expected to be service-oriented, hard-working, and an advocate for their group, while also hiding their unique personal identity and being accepting of patron abuse. And while a staff member’s own performance in a routine often invalidated these standards, both the performance and the standards they invalidated were often based on identity-based standards of normativity. The efforts of staff to work around these discrepancies are leading to added stress, frustration, and depersonalization. Findings suggest that certain staff are more susceptible to these challenges, including staff of color, LGBTQIA+ staff, staff with mental illnesses, and staff with chronic pain. Yet, findings also suggest opportunities for library management and decision-makers to introduce contextual supports that work to eliminate problematic routines or help staff work around them.

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