

Critical Self Reflection Moving Inward to Provide Outward Service

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Introduction

The demographics of the United States are becoming increasingly more racially diverse yet librarianship remains a largely white and female dominated profession. If you identify as white, and have had the experience of being socialized in segregated environments this might influence how you provide library services to patrons, and it might influence your relationships with colleagues. There is some discourse in librarianship about race and the role of whiteness as a factor in the provision of library services.¹ If you were socialized to view whiteness as universal and objective you might see color as something others have, and see color as unrelated to you.² This activity is meant to give white librarians coming from this perspective space to acknowledge this, to consider cultural background, and how you view whiteness.³ Likewise non-white librarians might find value in reflecting on your identity, and how identity influences your work as a librarian.

Librarians are service professionals, and we should cultivate sensitivity and awareness about our patrons' cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, social and religious identities, as well as other intersections of identities like sexual orientation or socioeconomic status. Other disciplines, like education, social work, and the health-sciences, offer reflective activities to encourage service providers to think about their cultural background in order to improve how they interact with people they help, and the field of librarianship can benefit from more reflection like this.⁴

Goals

This activity is designed to encourage you to think visually about identity and uses images to create a collage. You can do this on your own or with other librarians. Melanie Tervalon and

Jann Murray-Garcia might describe this activity as a step along the path of cultural humility, where an individual cultivates a practice of self-reflection in order to be a better service provider to patrons and colleagues.⁵ If you identify as a white librarian, consider how your experiences as a white person impact patron service or your relationships with colleagues.

Guiding Questions

These questions are designed to help you reflect about your cultural identity and whiteness.⁶

This activity can be done alone or with a group. Use your answers to the questions below to help you assemble a collage.

- If you identify as white, how would you describe your culture?
- Do you know your ancestral background?
- What is your family's country of origin?
- What is the origin of your family name?
- What have been your cultural traditions?
- In what ways do you identify with the geography of where you grew-up?
- What was the role of women, elders, men, children, and others in your family?
- Is education valued in your cultural background?
- What are your religious foundations?
- What cultural groups do you have experience with?
- Have you lived or traveled to another country?
- If you have lived or traveled to another country how did this shape your cultural identity?⁷

After you assemble your collage share it. In a group describe your collage, using the debrief questions below to guide your group discussion. If you do this activity alone, write responses in your notebook.

Debrief Questions

- If you identify as white how difficult was it to create a collage of your cultural identity?
- Did you learn anything new about yourself?
- Did you struggle to find images that represent the different dimensions of your identity?
- Was the exercise easy? Difficult?
- Did it help you think about the role of culture and whiteness in the library environment?

Why do this activity

If you identify as a white person you may not have taken the time or have been given the space to reflect on how your experiences impact how you provide service or how you interact with colleagues. In the context of the United States conversations about race are necessary and often absent. This exercise provides an introspective entry point into self-reflection that can lead to conversations about race with the intent to improve oneself as a library professional.

Conclusions/thoughts for future reflection

This activity is meant to help librarians to begin the work of cultural self-reflection for the purposes of practicing librarianship guided by cultural humility. Be open to sharing what you learn with others. Going through this process might bring up additional questions about bias, prejudice, and racism; tread into these realms with care and courage. To do this I recommend

reading some anti-racist literature: a good place to begin is with the work of Dr. Robin DiAngelo, Dr. Eduardo Bonilla Silva, bell hooks, and Dr. Stuart Hall. Keep a notebook of your progress as you question and learn more about your cultural heritage. You might also join one of the ethnic affiliate organizations or identity roundtables of the American Library Association to become involved in conversations about identity.⁸ If your library does not have an outlet for these discussions find other librarians in your area through your state run library association or other regional library associations.

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¹ Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005). <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp>

²Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to be White*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

³*Whiteness studies literature documents how the label of white tends to erase cultural background, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006). This questioning can include thinking about white privilege. To learn more about white privilege read the seminal 1989 full essay written by Peggy McIntosh, Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. *Peace and Freedom Magazine*. July/August, (1989) : 10-12. A 2015 article discussing the performing of whiteness in librarianship by Angela Galvan is listed in the bibliography of this piece. Galvan expands on the idea of white privilege within librarianship.

⁴Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia. "Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998) :117. Marta I. Cruz-Jansen and Marilyn Taylor. "Hitting the Ground Running: Why Introductory Teacher Education Courses Should Deal with Multiculturalism." *Multicultural Education* 12, no. 1 (2004): 16–23.

⁵Melanie Tervalon and Murray-Garcia. "Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998) : 117-125.

⁶*In the education literature pre-service teachers often engage in activities where they question their cultural background. If the pre-service teachers identify as "normal, white Americans" they struggle with explaining their cultural background. Examples include, "Well I'm just American." The question, then, becomes what does it mean to be just "American" or "white"? How would you visually represent the culture of a "white person" or an "American"? See

DiAngeo, *What Does it Mean to be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

^{7*}The feeling of not being seen as other, or black, appears to change when one travels internationally. James Baldwin and others have described the phenomena of feeling American rather than being identified by color when traveling outside of United States. See James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

^{8*}The ethnic affiliate groups of the American Library Association are: The American Indian Library Association, Asian Pacific Islander Association, Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Chinese American Librarians Association, The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking. Other groups that might cover discussions about race and identity are: The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Roundtable and The Social Responsibilities Round Table. These are just a few of the many groups that address issues of race and identity in librarianship.