

# Libraries as Racialized Organizations: Salaries, BIPOC Librarians, and Leaving the Profession

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## ABSTRACT

The theory of racialized organizations states that organizations are racial structures which connect their rules to social and material resources which usually disadvantage people of color. Librarianship has historically been a White and feminized profession, factors that come together to create an environment in which people of color have low representation in the profession. One aspect of this low representation that is rarely discussed in the literature is that of librarians who decide to leave the profession due to low salaries. This study focuses on low salaries as a factor that precludes BIPOC librarians from advancing in their careers and moving through the ranks in their library organizations.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Critical librarianship; Academic libraries; Public libraries; Political economy of the information society.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

BIPOC librarians; Library employment; Libraries as organizations; Theory of Racialized Organizations.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.1939>

## Introduction

Victor Ray (2019) reminds us that organizations are typically construed as race neutral in terms of their formation, hierarchies, and processes; while race is seen as a personal identity, separated from the day to day workings of organizations. However, an ever growing body of work from a wide array of disciplinary fields has demonstrated that race is a deciding factor in multiple employment aspects, from hiring processes (Quillian et al., 2020), to disciplinary actions (Walter et al., 2021), and promotions (Sheth Trivedi, 2023).

This work will study the role of libraries as racialized organizations through the mechanism of salaries. Any conversation of salaries in the library profession must part from the understanding of this field as a feminized profession. These are defined as professions in which women are predominantly represented; and include fields such as nursing, education, and librarianship (Crothers et al., 2010; Williams, 1992). In this type of profession men are favored over women in many dimensions of work including in the processes of hiring and promotion, which are tied to higher salaries. This phenomenon has been described by Williams (1992) as “the glass escalator.”

As a feminized profession, librarianship demonstrates a lower salary base than other professions. The annual median salary for librarians in the United States is currently estimated at \$64,370 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Although this represents an increase from 2015, when the estimate was \$56,450, it remains low, especially considering that librarians tend to be highly educated professionals holding master’s degrees. In contrast, the mean annual salary for library assistants is much lower at \$35,970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

Salary is one of the main issues that arises in discussions of librarian retention (Fyn et al., 2019). But despite this being a well-known issue, there is a conspicuous lack of research directly addressing salaries and retention of employees in librarianship. The focus of most research related to librarians’ work seems to veer towards issues related to work conditions (Hanz & McKinnon, 2025; Olivas & Ma, 2009), academic preparation and skill development (Bright & Colón-Aguirre; Riesen, 2024), and burnout (Nardine, 2019; Wood et al., 2022).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite multiple efforts at diversification, the library and information science (LIS) profession remains stubbornly homogenous especially in terms of race and ethnicity of its professionals. According to numbers by Rosa and Henke, in 2017 86.7% of librarians were White, 4.7% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 4.4% as African American, 3.6% Asian, 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. This lack of representation has led many to question the profession’s approaches to recruitment and retention of LIS professionals (Cole & Mross, 2022; Li, 2021).

However, a recent study by Buchel and Coleman (2022) suggests that ethnic minorities are not underrepresented in LIS but that there is unequal participation in LIS occupations by different races due to factors that cannot be mitigated by a change in organizational policies. Instead, factors including education, culture, and salaries need to be explored to better

understand the lack of participation in LIS occupations by racial and ethnic minorities (Buchel & Coleman, 2022).

While racial and ethnic diversification continues to be a struggle, there has been recognition of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for libraries. Meier's (2024) study of academic library leaders identified DEI goals, particularly those related to hiring, promotion, and salaries, as significant drivers of change in academic libraries.

### **Concerns with salaries and retention in LIS.**

While limited, there has been some research focused on salaries in the LIS field. A 2021 study by Li identified "...a significant salary gap between visible minorities and nonvisible minorities..." in Canadian academic and research libraries, with Li asserting that reaching racial pay equity would be an important factor for the retention of visible minorities (p. 449). In 2024, David Petersen completed a longitudinal exploration of salaries for medical libraries reported in the Medical Library Association salary survey. Petersen found that while recent average salaries showed a small increase, inflation-adjusted salaries indicated a decline that could potentially threaten recruitment and retention to the field. Petersen's work relies solely on self-reported quantitative data and does not offer qualitative evidence to support the potential threat that lower salaries may have on LIS retention, nor does their study offer insights on differences for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) librarians.

In a 2011 opinion piece, Cottrell argued that salary was a key factor in librarian turnover and recommended that hiring managers work on raising salaries to improve recruitment and retention. More recently, quantitative empirical studies have shown salary to factor into librarians' dissatisfaction with their workplaces and their decisions to leave a position. In a 2019 survey of 275 US academic librarians, Fyn et al. found that non-competitive salaries, pay disparity with peers, and future salary prospects were factors in librarians choosing to leave a position. Higher salaries are noted as one condition, in addition to other factors such as professional development opportunities, additional bonuses and benefits, and opportunities to participate in decision-making, that supports retention of employees in knowledge-intensive fields (Kossyva et al., 2024). Despite the idea that increased salary could retain librarians in a position, a 2011 survey of over 800 academic librarians by Strothmann and Ohler found that counter offers to retain academic librarians was the least frequently reported retention initiative offered by their library or their university.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This work employs Victor Ray's (2022) theory of racialized organizations as a framework. This theory states that organizations are racial structures which connect their rules to social and material resources. This means that discrimination practices in societies dictate who is likely to be hired for a job, where the person hired will end up in the organizational hierarchy, and how their interactions with other employees are likely to play out.

This theory helps explain why BIPOCs tend to remain employed in the lower clusters of organizational hierarchies, are relegated to menial jobs, or tend to be assigned variable schedules

which make planning and family time harder (Ray, 2019, 2022). Ray (2019) indicates that the main characteristics of racialized organizations include racialization, segregation, differential wages, and racial tasks.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This work is part of a larger research project intended to investigate the retention of librarians who identify as BIPOC in the library profession. The research project followed a mixed method sequential explanatory design which included a survey during phase I and follow up interviews with a sample of those who had completed the survey and had volunteered to take part by providing their contact information in phase II. The main research question explored here is:

**RQ:** What is the role of salaries as a factor for BIPOC librarians' intention to leave the profession?

The results presented here stem from the interview portion of the project, or phase II. This phase aimed to understand why participants had left the field or were considering leaving the field. This phase included the participation of 20 individuals all holding an MLIS or equivalent degree. Nineteen of the 20 participants identified as BIPOC, with one identifying as White. Of the total sample five were no longer employed in LIS organizations, nine were still employed in the field but were likely to leave their jobs within the year, five indicated it was unlikely that they would leave the field, and one had never worked in the field post their MLIS degree completion.

The interviews were conducted using Zoom and were automatically transcribed and reviewed by the researchers. The verbatim transcripts were anonymized by the researchers, which included removing all personal, organizational, and position names as well as assigning a pseudonym for each participant. The anonymized transcripts were sent to the participants for review and approval.

After receiving the approved transcripts the researchers analyzed the data, starting with the coding process which employed constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Transcripts were coded deductively with a first round of open coding and memoing employed for initial data exploration. This was followed by successive rounds of axial coding in which the open codes were grouped based on patterns between similar or related concepts (Saldaña, 2016). The findings presented here are based on codes which were selected through agreement by the researchers.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

One overall finding of this study is the relationship of salary and retention. In the case of the librarians interviewed in this study who had left the profession, many indicated that the salary they received when employed in libraries was low and that a better salary would have helped retain them in the profession. This was also the case for those who were planning to leave the profession. For example, participant Fernley (Black/African American), who had left the

profession and was self-employed at the time of the interview, indicated that the low salary was a main determining factor for them leaving their job as an academic librarian. In their interview Fernley indicated:

*“...and I needed to make more money too. Right? Like that the pay there was not great. Like, I think I was only making maybe like 30, maybe 32 grand, something around there. So I was like at some point I have to make some money.”*

Even for those working as librarians, the issues of lower salaries were a determining factor in their decision to leave the profession. For example, Dabney (Hispanic/Latinx), was working as an academic librarian at the time of their interview, however they had already made up their mind about leaving the profession and pursuing a career in philanthropy, due to what they perceived as unfair treatment which barred them from a position with a better salary. As reflected in the following exchange between them and the interviewer, the main driver for this decision to leave the profession was financial.

*Interviewer 1: Okay. And what, what triggered that, that interest in, you know, moving to philanthropy?*

*Dabney: Well, one, the money is really good.*

Dabney’s perception of the low salary also permeates a bigger conversation about the high cost of education. When asked about any advice they would give to a person who communicated with them an interest in joining librarianship, Dabney’s candid answer was to not do it because the prospects of earning a salary high enough to help cover the costs incurred in getting the degree necessary to do it were not worth it.

*“I'm embarrassed to say, like, I've told them don't do it. You know, like, I've told them the money is not worth it, like, with the amount of money you're gonna go into debt for getting your degree.”*

On this front, Dabney has even tried warning those interested in a career in librarianship about the high cost of the education versus the low salary. Although the general view is that a college education is still a sound investment (Abel & Deitz, 2014), even if one for which the rewards come later in life than anticipated (Webber, 2016), this is not the case for most master’s degrees which have been identified as leaving students financially worse off in terms of accumulated debt recipients must incur to get these versus the modest earning potential (Cooper, 2024).

Although in general the MLS degree might be a low return of investment degree, it is a reality that to be employed in the profession still requires the master's degree. It is also a reality that the ability of library employees to earn a higher salary is tied to their ability to be promoted to professional librarian positions rather than paraprofessional positions, including library assistants and library technicians.

This finding is worthy of more exploration especially when seen from the perspective of the theory of racialized organizations, in which BIPOCs generally receive lower salaries or are

relegated to positions in the organizational hierarchy which command a lower pay. For example, Bailey (Black/African American) had been working in a public library in a capacity of library assistant for four years and was even encouraged to get their MLIS degree by colleagues who admired their relaxed approach to the challenging aspects of the job. However, after multiple interviews at the library in which they worked, they would be passed over for the job for applicants with less experience. As Bailey explained in their interview:

*“...unfortunately after 21 job interviews at the public library and not getting any of 'em I had talks with one of their administrators who said my scores were perfect. I aced the interview, and they just didn't have a reason to why I wasn't being selected for these interviews. Especially when some of the candidates that were coming in had less experience than I did.”*

Bailey's experience is one which mirrors the situation for many in the profession. By blocking them from advancing in their career, though holding the position of librarian rather than one as library assistant, their organization blocked Bailey from a significant monetary gain as a professional.

It is worth highlighting here that, although mostly a White profession, the number of BIPOCs among library employees is higher at the lower hierarchical level where assistant librarians can be found. According to numbers compiled by the AFL-CIO, although 83% of librarians identify as White, this number is lower among library assistants with 73% identifying as White (Department of Professional Employees, n.d.). According to the union, the salary differences between library professionals and library assistants are significant, with library professionals commanding around \$32.97 an hour versus \$17.29 an hour for library assistants.

## CONCLUSIONS

Research related to retention of librarians seldom delves into the role low salaries play in the retention of employees in this field, especially from a qualitative approach. With the recognition of librarianship as a feminized profession which means practitioners in the field have lower prospects for salary gains (Crothers, 2010; Williams, 1992), this research has indicated that retention of BIPOCs also seems to be rooted in racial discrimination inherent to libraries as organizations. The experiences of the librarians interviewed for this project indicate that the problem of retention is one which requires an intersectional approach with exploration of both gender and race acting as deterrents in career advancement and retention in the field.

The preliminary findings presented in this study indicate that LIS organizations function as racialized organizations with the clearest pattern indicating the relegation of library practitioners to lower pay level work including blocking them from moving up the organizational hierarchy or assigning them to roles with lower pay prospects. The effects of not being able to advance to higher positions as librarians, as in Dabney's case, or being relegated to the position of library assistant, as in Bailey's case, had tangible repercussions for retaining them in the profession. This included making decisions to leave their positions for better paid opportunities in other libraries and leaving the profession.

Future studies should consider the intersectional roles of race and gender and the assignment of roles in libraries. This is an important consideration due to the organizational routines serving as enablers or constraints of individual attitudes and discrimination (Ray, 2019), therefore their role in the study of the work experiences of BIPOC librarians should not be ignored.

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