

Professional Identity and Threats to Non-Normative Identities: Grand Challenges for LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

One of the central aims of LIS curriculum is to socialize students into the professional identity of librarianship. However, attempts to do this often center around the identities of white workers. To effectively address the ways in which non-normative identities are targeted and threatened, LIS institutions need to identify new approaches. In this paper, we outline our empirical and participatory approach to this grand challenge, built on research with library workers. Despite the recent attacks on any consideration of identity, library education will need to continue centering the profession's identity issues.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Curriculum; pedagogy; Critical librarianship; Social justice

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Identity; Identity threats; Library workers

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INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the specific career a student is pursuing, a consideration of identity is fundamental to their preparation. And while it's true that much of what it means to be a professional is learned on the job, formal education can establish a cognitive base for notions of professional identity (Cruess, Cruess, & Steinert, 2019). Education often represents the first step toward the development of a librarian identity and gives students the opportunity to begin the negotiation of their pre-existing identities with that of the profession (Pierson, Goudling, Campbell-Meier, 2019).

Yet, socialization into a professional identity tends to focus primarily on the experiences of professionals with normative identities, as noted in the training of physicians (Wyatt et al., 2021). As a result, students with non-normative identities—e.g., students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, students with disabilities—end up feeling like they don't belong in the profession or that they need to be someone else to fit. This is highlighted in the *changing same* of BIPOC faculty in LIS (Irvin, Kumasi, & Akinola, 2024) who feel that they must “constantly adjust, shift and change our responses to the white behaviors of faculty colleagues and students to negotiate an equitable work life in order to earn a living” (p. 1598), and it extends to the students in LIS programs. To further complicate matters, an educational program's ability to consider identity is under attack by a presidential administration who believes that such a consideration represents “wokeness” and “leftist indoctrination” (Figueroa, Alexander, & Williams, 2025).

The grand challenge facing LIS educational institutions, then, centers around how it socializes students with non-normative identities into a professional identity that has not fully accounted for them, and how it prepares all students to shift library work structures in ways that better support their colleagues. Based on a year-long qualitative investigation with public library workers, we present a workshopping model that supports the discipline's efforts to meet this grand challenge.

OVERVIEW

Amy—a hypothetical library worker—graduates with an MLIS and starts working in a library at the age of 25. Working 40 hours per week until the age of 65, she will spend 83,200 hours of her life as a library worker. This means that Amy's sense of who she is at work represents a significant component of her overall sense of self (Gini, 1998). Her ability to associate herself with librarianship—i.e., to be seen as a library *professional*—can provide her with a source of meaningfulness that helps her define her overall self-concept and purpose (Caza & Creary). A positive work identity—one that enables Amy to see herself as competent, capable, worthy, and accepted—can help her deal with adversity and stress, foster creativity, and increase her access to social capital (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010).

Yet, our research (Freeburg & Klein, 2025a, b) has found that library work can also threaten Amy's positive identification with the profession. An identity threat holds the potential

to devalue Amy’s identity, change the meanings she associates with an identity, or prevent her from enacting an identity (Petriglieri, 2011). It can call into question the power and prestige she associates with her group identity (Craig, Thatcher, & Grover, 2019), the competence and skill she associates with her role identity (Stets & Burke, 2005), and the “sense of continuity, integration, identification, and differentiation” she associates with her person identity (Hewitt, 1989, p. 179). Our research suggests that these threats are even more likely if our hypothetical library worker is a person of color, has a disability, is LGBTQIA+, or suffers from mental health struggles.

The grand challenge for LIS education as it relates to Amy’s story is two-fold. First, curriculum needs to prepare all students—not just those like Amy—to meaningfully change the structure of library work that is responsible for the existence of identity threats. While it is true that some identity threats can be identity enhancing—in so far as they lead to growth (Petriglieri, 2011)—many are damaging and will likely cause workers like Amy to leave the profession. Second, curriculum should recognize that these solutions will not come overnight and, in the meantime, workers like Amy need to be prepared for the realities of library work. This means an overview of the threats they are likely to encounter, as well training in effective responses.

We invited public library workers with identities that are in some way underrepresented, marginalized, and/or stigmatized to record audio diaries about their frustrating experiences with routine library work. 54 library workers with non-normative identities participated, recording 265 audio diaries—each 5-7 minutes long. The reason we focused on routine work is because this work occurs with such regularity and consistency that the threats encountered are less likely to be noticed or called out. They become normal, part of *the way we do things around here*. Findings show that identity threats are sourced from other human actors in the library, e.g. patrons, colleagues, and management, as well as non-human actors, e.g., technology and the physical space. After analyzing the nature of the threats, we turned our attention to the implications for curriculum. The result of this effort was the development of a participatory workshop framework that addresses the two-fold nature of this grand challenge. While these workshops will eventually be used in a full course on professional identity, the current paper outlines them as activities within existing courses.

IDENTITY THREAT WORKSHOPS

Because it was important that the library workers most affected by the study’s findings drove the development of responses, we adopted a participatory design framework for the development of the Identity Threat Workshops (ITW). Originating in Scandinavia in the 1970s, and motivated by a Marxist commitment to empowering workers in the face of management’s technological impositions, participatory design work is done *with* rather than on *behalf* of users (Spinuzzi, 2005). Grounded in a similar aim to empower library workers, the ITWs expand the notion of design to include the development of identity threat response strategies and contextual support structures.

Grand challenge component #1.

The ITWs are divided into two sections. The first section addresses the first component of the identified grand challenge—preparing all students in the development of contextual structures that support workers dealing with damaging identity threats. Originating in research with LGBTQIA+ workers, contextual supports include a) formal policies that signal support to workers, b) a workplace climate that regularly enacts these policies and affords workers psychological safety and spaces to express themselves, and c) workplace relationships that afford emotional, instrumental, and informational support (Webster et al., 2018).

To address this first component, the workshops make use of a *Backcasting Wheel*. This approach is based on the *Futures Wheel*, which is a brainstorming method that invites participants to identify the direct and indirect future consequences of a series of actions (Glenn, 2009). The result is detailed graphic display that resembles a mind map. Rather than start from the present and move toward the future, however, a Backcasting Wheel starts from an ideal future and considers the specific actions and conditions necessary to achieve that future (Bengston & Dockry, 2020). The benefit of this approach is that it is not constrained by present conditions—which is particularly important in the current climate of attacks on discussions of identity. While the specific details of the future are determined by participants themselves, they typically involve a future where damaging identity threats are eliminated. Participants then engage in several additional rounds where they consider:

- Dimensions of success: What would need to be true for this future to become a reality?
- Signposts: How would we know if we are successful?
- Obstacles and opportunities: What could prevent us from achieving a signpost? What could help us achieve a signpost?
- Concrete actions: What specific things can we do to either avoid an obstacle or take advantage of an opportunity?
- Scoring: Score elements of the wheel based on feasibility, importance, and urgency.

The result is a detailed strategy for a library's practical response to the existence of identity threats—one that a student could take with them into their first library job. This means that, ideally, students would participate in these workshops after initial courses in management and leadership that outline the tools of strategic planning. They would then draw from these tools in their construction of the Backcasting Wheel.

Grand challenge component #2.

To address the second component of the identified grand challenge—supporting worker responses to identity threats—the workshops make use of vignettes. Given that the discomfort associated with talking about identity has only heightened in recent years, LIS curriculum needs to consider additional ways to invite students to talk about it. Stories are a particularly effective tool for these discussions, as workers inherently rely on narratives to create and re-create their sense of self (Stein, Galliers, & Markus, 2013). Vignettes are short stories or scenarios used to

measure subjective beliefs, attitudes, and values that might otherwise be difficult to discuss (Palaiologou, 2017). As a story about someone else, vignettes offer participants an opportunity to discuss identity in a less-threatening way (Barter and Renold, 2000), while still discussing it on their own terms (Gourlay et al., 2014).

A total of six vignettes were constructed (Table 1), each depicting actual events based on an analysis of the audio diaries from library workers. In each, a library worker faces an identity threat and engages in one of the response types outlined by Petriglieri (2011). Three of the responses target the source of the threat, i.e. identity protection responses, including a) derogation of the source in an attempt to reduce threat severity, b) concealing an identity in order to decrease the likelihood that a source will threaten it, and c) presenting positive information about the threatened identity as a means of changing other people’s perceptions of it. The other three responses target the identity that is under threat, i.e., identity-restructuring responses, including changing the importance of the identity to reduce the severity of the threat, changing the meanings associated with the threatened identity to sidestep the threat, and abandoning the identity or leaving the roles associated with it. Participants are asked to read each vignette and consider the following questions:

- Would you call this a happy story or a sad story? Something else?
- Think about the context of the story. Why is this happening? What led to this? What do you think happened next?
- Think about the worker’s response. Why do you think they responded that way? How effective was their response?
- How do you think the response impacted the worker?
- Put yourself in the story—have you ever faced anything similar? How was your response similar/different from the main character in the story?
- What, if anything, would you change to turn this into an ideal story where everything works out perfectly?

The result is the development of real-world strategies for responding to identity threats. By considering stories associated with several different response types, students will be able to identify responses that best fit them and their context. This is a significantly better approach than the research team attempting to describe the effectiveness of these strategies on their own.

Table 1
Identity Threat and Response Vignettes

Story	Response Type
John identifies as a gay man. He prides himself on being available to patrons and helping them with what they need. When he’s in the children’s section, however, he often feels like people are skeptical of his presence—likely because he is a gay man	Concealing

Story	Response Type
working in a conservative community. So, when he helps these patrons, he tries to tone down/mask his identity. This includes being less enthusiastic and more subdued.	
Amy struggles to fulfill her role of managing circulation when colleagues don't complete their work. Yet, she struggles to communicate this because her colleagues think she's rude—likely because her ASD can make her appear standoffish and unfriendly. She responds by adding tasks to her role. By doing the work of other people herself, she avoids the issues she's had when she tries to directly communicate with them.	Changed Meaning
Over Jennifer's long career, she has weathered many changes in the profession. However, her library recently switched to new catalog software that is very confusing and has resulted in a lot of wasted time. She doesn't complain, however, because she's worried that the younger staff would see this as a sign that she's too old and technologically illiterate. As a result of this, she is contemplating early retirement.	Abandonment
Domonique sees herself as a highly motivated and successful librarian, despite her processing disorder. However, management recently denied her request to wear headphones as she works on the floor. To help her cope, she reasons that management—who does not have any disabilities—simply does not understand and is being unreasonable. This would certainly not be the first time.	Derogation
As a Black woman working in a makerspace, Rebecca is used to people assuming she knows nothing about technology. One day, a patron seemed surprised that she knew basic things and eventually asked to speak to someone else. She responds by stating, "I have a technology degree and am the resident expert on all of these tools, so if you ask anyone else, they will probably just send you back to me." The patron acquiesces and asks his question.	Positive Distinction
As a Muslim, Jordan tries to make time at work for daily prayers. This can be difficult at work, though, because there are no good spaces for this. While he could address this with management, he's worried that they would not understand. After all, he's the only in the library who is Muslim. Ultimately, he decides that daily prayers aren't that important to him and he never brings it up.	Changed Importance

CONCLUSION

Professional identity continues to be an essential component of LIS curriculum. Yet, given the lack of diversity in the profession, existing considerations of the profession's identity tend to center white workers. To address identity effectively, including the ways in which non-normative identities are targeted and threatened, LIS institutions need to identify new approaches. In the current paper, we outlined our empirical and participatory approach to this grand challenge, built on research with library workers. Despite the recent attacks on any mention of identity, library education will need to continue centering the profession's identity issues.

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