

Strategic Foresight in Civic Engagement for Racial Justice: Exploratory Qualitative Perspectives of Public Library Staff in the American South

Bharat Mehra^a, Kimberly Black^b, Kaurri C. Williams-Cockfield^a, and Baheya S. Jaber^a

^aUniversity of Alabama, USA

^bChicago State University, USA

bmehra@ua.edu, kblack21@csu.edu, kcwilliamscockfield@crimson.ua.edu,
bsjaber@crimson.ua.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly identifies qualitative themes from semi-structured feedback collected in online interviews/focus groups with forty public library staff in the American South about their foresight regarding library roles in civic engagement to promote racial justice. The research is timely in its engagement with stakeholders who are now directly impacted by the recent political and financial threats to federal funding and support of library-related agencies and assaults on public organizations that promote diversity and inclusion. Library staff provide potential directions of future engagement to support racial justice that spotlights their constructive role of resilience in response to these harsh political realities in the United States. Questions around the why's, how's, what's, and specific actions integrated in data collection form a possible framework providing potential holistic structure of organization, content, representation, and delivery of civic engagement for racial justice in public library and communities to be developed further in future research.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Critical librarianship; Public libraries; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

American South; Civic engagement; Exploratory; Qualitative themes; Racial justice.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly identifies qualitative themes from semi-structured online interviews/focus groups with forty public library staff in the American South¹ about their perception of the future regarding library roles in civic engagement to promote racial justice (Mehra, Black, Jaber, and Williams-Cockfield, 2024a). The research is timely in its collection of qualitative feedback from stakeholders who are now directly impacted by the recent political threats, legislative attacks, and financial downsizing of library-related agencies following the new federal administration (Mehra, 2025). The research forms part of a larger three-year grant entitled “Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in Public Libraries (RJ@PL)” recently funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ *National Leadership Grants for Libraries* to the University of Alabama and Chicago State University from August 2022 – July 2025 [LG-252354-OLS-22] [Terminated April 8, 2025: President’s Executive Order 14238].² Findings from library staff regarding potential directions of future engagement to support racial justice spotlights their constructive role of resilience and potential collaborative strategies responding to the recent negative political climate targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the United States (Klassen, 2024; Mehra, Black, Williams-Cockfield, and Jaber, 2024).

CONTEXT OF STUDY

The brief contextual dimensions reflect this research’s significance. First, the current political climate targeting DEI-related efforts is the consequence of a broken democracy in the United States (Buschman, 2017; Mehra, 2023). Public library staff feedback about their roles to promote civic engagement for racial justice is valuable since it reflects a courageous response despite external forces of power and control (Mehra, Black, Jaber, and Williams-Cockfield, 2024b). Second, this research provides glimpses of an alternate narrative going beyond the sweeping “conservative-liberal” divisive rhetoric within which the predominant stereotypes position the American South as racially intolerant (Cooper and Terrill, 2019; Escott, Goldfield, McMillen, and Turner, 1999). Our findings challenge such limited notions and highlight public libraries as “spaces of resistance” within the simplified narratives of race (Mehra, and Jaber, 2023). Further, the American South has experienced a history of racism and ongoing resistance to civil rights; this research’s strategy of documenting public librarians’ civic engagement to further racial justice is resistance to the region’s dysfunctional realities connected to very particular milieus of race-relations (Segrest, 2019; Woodman, 1979). In addition, the research scope is intentionally focused on the regional level with affirming stories of impact, leadership, civic engagement, and racial justice that contribute to shifting the national narrative to promote progress toward recoveries from its racialized wounds (Salter and Adams, 2013). The possibility

¹ The United States Census Bureau (2019) demarcates the southern region to include sixteen states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia) and the District of Columbia (Graham and Zentella, 2010; Harvey, 2016; Ray, 2003).

² <https://sites.ua.edu/civicengagement4racialjustice/>.

for solutions tailored to the regional contexts recognize a need to develop real solutions based on authentic ground-zero cultural differences (Shiva, 1993). Finally, a standardized “cookie-cutter” approach is a fallacy based on homogenization since it lacks specific applications to local conditions. This research explores possibilities of “promising practices” to develop a bottom-up instead of top-down strategy (IMLS, 2020; LaFontaine and Sawchuck, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Civic engagement involves efforts that make a difference in community life by creating “civic commons” for people to engage with each other for the diversely perceived public good (Coward, McClay, and Garrido, 2018; Kranich, 2012). The related concept of “community engagement” provides a framework for academicians/researchers to collaborate with external communities and develop mutually acceptable solutions to concerns (Lee, 2023; Mehra and Robinson, 2009). This research explores select southern public library staff’s future roles to strengthen community relationships and promote racial justice (Wood and Gray, 1991).

Strategic foresight is a set of methods and practice, and a theoretical frame defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as “analysis of plausible futures, which can support better policy making. Rather than making predictions based on linear extrapolation of past and current trends, foresight cultivates the capacity to anticipate alternative futures” (OECD, n.d.). Strategic foresight assumes that future is uncertain but can be influenced; it is characterized by action, reflection, and knowledge production (Coates et al., 2010). In this research, strategic foresight was used as a frame and method to explore possible futures, anticipate change, challenge mental models, and ultimately inform future decision-making related to civic engagement for social change.

RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative study is an extended application of action research that involves collaborations between a “professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve a situation” through solutions emerging from the community (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Here action research involved collecting feedback from members of an underrepresented group (i.e., southern public library staff) about a controversial topic, racial justice, as a scholarly focus (Reardon, 1998; Smith and Patin, 2024; Stringer, 1999). Further, social justice was operationalized in systematic and inferential ways via collecting strategic feedback about future actions of possible change participants themselves proposed, and the support they required, with a granular scrutiny of the “why’s”, “how’s”, “what’s,” and specific actions (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2013). Collecting community assessment data from southern public library staff about future civic engagement responding to racism provided a significant strategic planning opportunity, especially in the current political climate, to be reported in future publications.

Feedback was collected in 23 online events (13 interviews and 10 focus groups each with 2-4 participants from different states) through the zoom synchronous communication platform.

Participants were recruited through professional electronic listservs, researchers' networks, and snowballing techniques. The lead author's institutional review board approved the human subjects' protocols and participants were provided a \$30 gift card for their involvement. The instrument for data collection³ framed questions in the following categories: demographics, perceived overall importance, why important, improvements: how, what improvements, and future actions. Participants discussed each of these topics, and steps in the analysis process included:

1. Zoom transcribed recordings of participant responses were assigned a unique number with an assigned event number for interviews/focus groups.
2. Digital event transcriptions were saved as a Google document and the responses were separated by question number (q1, q2, etc.) and then analyzed to identify specific themes (t1) and their categories for each question, identified via applying open, selective, and axial coding with assigned numbers for participant (event), question, and theme/category (Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 2005).
3. Once all the interviews/focus group responses were analyzed and coded, a separate Google document was created for each question with coded responses highlighted to generate finalized themes.
4. The list of identified responses was illustrated with supporting participant quotations, edited to address repetition, conciseness, sharpness, etc. Nested elements emerged in the process to reflect a hierarchy of structure (e.g., broader, narrower, related).

Limitations include self-selected participation based on researchers' existing social networks and participants possibly conscious of sharing feedback in a group, amongst others.

FINDINGS

This section briefly documents selective themes compiled from participants' responses to each question. Future publications will provide extended discussion. Owing to limitations of space, we have hosted verbatim quotations with appropriate code illustrating each theme on a webserver⁴.

Participant Demographics (Q1)

Participant's self-identified demographics [n = 40] included (only top two majority categories):

- Gender: Undisclosed = 7/40 (17.5%); Female = 25/40 (62.5%).
- Race: African American/Black = 10/40 (25%); White = 22/40 (55%).
- Geography: North Carolina = 5/40 (12.5%); Tennessee = 9/40 (22.5%).
- Title: Director = 9/40 (22.5%); Unit head = 12/40 (30%).
- Employment: part-time = 3/40 (7.5%); full-time = 35/40 (87.5%).

³ URL: <https://sites.ua.edu/bmehra/files/2025/03/Questionnaire.pdf>.

⁴ URL: <https://sites.ua.edu/bmehra/files/2025/03/themesquotes.pdf>.

- Worked in libraries: Undisclosed = 8/40 (20%); 1-5 years = 9/40 (22.5%).

Perceived Overall Importance (Q2)

Of the 16 participants who responded (40% response rate), seven considered their public library's civic engagement with external communities to further racial justice as "indispensable" (43.75%), another seven considered the work as "very important" (43.75%), one believed it as "neither important nor unimportant" (6.25%), while one considered the work as "not important" (6.25%).

Why Important? (Q3)

Three themes in why participants considered civic engagement for racial justice important included serving the totality of the library's communities to address the unmet needs of marginalized populations [specifically families] and building understanding/respect for differences when working with different cultural groups (t1). Taking an active role to facilitate racial justice in the region also involved community conversations about racial justice, reflecting the library's commitment to address social justice with respect to all, and resisting political movements that marginalized people (t2). Creating an equitable information services environment for the community was an important theme and included provision of safe spaces and developing a racially diverse workforce (t3).

Improvements: How? (Q4)

Eight themes emerged in how a participant's library could make improvements in becoming an anchor to further racial justice. Developing library collections that represented marginalized communities involved collecting/curating local information. It included digital collections of oral histories/preservation of local marginalized community narratives (t1). Further, providing access to safe spaces for library workers and the community were important. This included provision of safe spaces for marginalized people to interact with information and the community at large to address social issues. Suggestions were provided for libraries' use for community discussions around civic engagement topics/issues, building a safe/supportive workplace that included DEI initiatives for staff, and encouraging understanding/empathy for marginalized people (t2). Providing access to programming meant facilitating staff acceptance of participation in programming that supported racial justice. It also included embedding racial justice programming in local history or other social impact programs and providing educational/cultural programming both in-house and through outreach to the community that supported racial/social justice initiatives (t3).

Building collaborative networks within the service/professional community involved connecting and sharing programs/services with local organizations, community leaders, and community activists. The importance of having a responsive library administration was considered key to support racial justice initiatives, promote community conversation around difficult topics, and encourage staff creativity and feedback (t4). Embedding/enacting DEI across all library policies involved creating, embedding, accessing, implementing (e.g.,

recruitment/retention of diverse staff), and marketing to support marginalized community members (t5). Building/soliciting local government and community support for library's racial justice initiatives were considered important to generate public "buy-in" of library support for racial justice (t6). Encouraging library staff to participate in local, state, and national organizations was related to opportunities for their own minority staff in the leadership of state/national library organizations and supporting all staff in community organizations that promoted racial justice (t7). Providing library services to marginalized populations involved serving as the local information hub and connecting marginalized people to community social services, renovating/locating public libraries to best serve disenfranchised populations, and supporting voter participation (t8).

What Specific Improvements? (Q5)

Five key themes emerged from participants' responses about specific improvements in civic engagement for racial justice. First, communicating the public library's role in supporting racial justice to external stakeholders would involve collecting community assessments to gather their input on library programs/services that supported racial justice. It also would involve marketing the value of the library to the community and local government; understanding local politics; and a need for libraries involvement in community to support racial justice and improve access to library programs, resources, and services on related concerns (t1). Next, building library service collaborations across local communities would include varied collaborative outreach to marginalized communities and implementation of cross-library system cooperation to improve situations arising from racism (t2). Creating an inclusive library environment would involve participants making the library inclusive via hiring diverse staff, appointing diverse library boards representative of the service community, fostering a culture where users felt comfortable asking for the diverse library programs/services, providing programs that celebrated community diversity in support of racial justice, and keeping library collections, staff, and patrons safe (t3). Developing library collections that preserved local cultures included a need for building a diverse library collection that reflected community views and served as a central clearing house for promoting a diverse cultural narrative (t4). Lastly, expanding library resources to address the needs of local marginalized communities was expressed in participants need to expand programs, services, and resources outside of the library's comfort zone, focusing on the people who used it, and maintaining a neutral position to covertly support racial justice (t5).

Specific Future Actions (Q6)

Participants identified five key future actions/recommended directions to extend their civic engagement roles to promote racial justice to other libraries. This included developing an actively supportive library administration on DEI initiatives. Participants consistently requested much needed support from their library administration/management powers to address racial justice, via: inclusion of racial justice practices in library planning, policy, and programming; creation of staff committee to directly engage with various stakeholders and elicit their support to further racial justice; work on restorative justice models; and, have library staff/management reflect the diversity in the community (t1). Conducting a diversity audit of library

collections/classification language was expressed in participants' call to use primary sources to focus library programs and collection development in support of racial justice (t2). Providing staff training/development in support of racial justice was represented in participants' belief that this was important across all library operations. They advocated for requiring library staff to volunteer work with other social justice organizations in the community to support racial justice, with clear instructions of how to conduct community assessments (t3). Providing access to inclusive library programming was expressed in participants adopting a multipronged approach. This included library development as a safe place to have conversations about race, addressing racial justice through library programming, provision of food services in the library, supporting patrons in learning about themselves and their community, and working with partners to provide/fund racial justice programs/services in the community (t4). Need for their library's promotion and advocacy for racial justice was noted by all participants through resources, programs, and services connected to equity; engagement with people; and emerging as a vocal supporter in a political climate not always receptive to public libraries supporting racial justice (t5). There were two participants who also noted their own ambiguities in contradictory statements indicating that racial justice should not always be an agenda in public libraries.

DISCUSSION

The questions around the why's, how's, what's, and specific actions integrated in the data collection instrument shaped the brief responses reported in this paper. These form a possible framework providing a potential holistic structure of organizing content, representation, and delivery connected to civic engagement for racial justice in public libraries and their communities to be developed further in future publications (Mehra, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This paper briefly highlighted key themes from qualitative feedback shared by select southern public librarians about civic engagement for racial justice under concerted political attacks over the past few years in the United States. The themes related to why's, how's, what's, and specific future actions provide valuable elements of resistance responding to external circumstances in the public library world (beyond their traditional activities). These also reflect strategic foresight and constructive advocacy that can potentially serve to significantly shape positive perceptions about public libraries amongst external stakeholders and garner support against possible political oppressions moving forward.

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