

Identity, *Familia*, and Belonging: Librarians of Latin American Heritage and Professional Associations

Alicia K. Long, University of Missouri, USA
Denice Adkins, University of Missouri, USA

Abstract

The lack of diversity in the library and information science (LIS) field is a historical problem in a profession that strives to provide access to information for all. Many librarians of Latin American heritage are and have been members and/or leaders of the American Library Association (ALA). Some of them are also members of and participate actively in the National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA). The purpose of this case study is to understand how librarians of Latin American heritage (LLAH) experience a sense of belonging within librarianship based on their dual identity as REFORMA and ALA members. Through semi-structured interviews with eight LLAH who are members of and leaders in ALA and REFORMA and analysis of documents from both associations, we identified three main themes. LLAH are a diverse group, intersectional, from different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds with the common goal of serving Latino communities. In REFORMA, these diverse professionals balance their individual and social identities to find a community and a support system that helps the sense of belonging in a predominantly White profession. Findings from this study have implications for professional associations and their leaders who wish to make librarians who are Latine feel that they belong in LIS.

Keywords: American Library Association (ALA); belonging; diversity; Latine; REFORMA

Publication Type: case study

Introduction

The lack of diversity in the library and information science (LIS) field is a historical problem in a profession that strives to provide access to information for all. Making the profession more diverse has been a persistent (but not always prominent) goal throughout the history of library services in the United States. Libraries serve diverse communities and when there is no diverse representation in library staff, there is a risk that some library users will not feel welcome in these public spaces; their specific needs might be overlooked, and collections and services will not always reflect their experiences. Many scholars and researchers have addressed different aspects of how to increase diversity in the profession, from recruiting (Kim & Sin, 2008), to representation (Adkins & Espinal, 2004), and to issues of social justice (Espinal et al., 2018). Most studies address this topic from a broad diversity perspective, related to a need for more librarians who identify as Black, Asian, Latine¹, Indigenous, or from other ethnic and racial groups, as well as those from diverse genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, religions, etc. Although “diverse” is a practical umbrella term to include all those categories, few studies in LIS

address the specific needs of librarians belonging to each of those groups individually, including those of Latin American origins.

Regarding professional associations, librarianship in the United States has grown under the influence of the American Library Association (ALA) since 1876. While diversity in the association's membership (and leadership) was not always seen as a need, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s infused the field with the formation of new groups of librarians and leaders of diverse backgrounds (Echavarria & Wertheimer, 1997; Espinal, 2001). Several associations known at the time as the "ethnic caucuses" currently called National Associations of Librarians of Color (NALCo), were formed during those decades. For librarians of Latin American heritage (LLAH), REFORMA, or the National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, was created in 1971 and associated with the ALA as an "ALA affiliate" in 1975 (Adkins et al., 2020).

Many LLAH are and have been members and/or leaders of the ALA, including two past presidents of the organization, Camila Alire and Loida Garcia-Febo. Latine leaders and librarians attend ALA events and actively participate in many of the association's divisions, committees, and round tables. Some of them are members who participate actively in REFORMA at the same time. REFORMA includes 20 chapters distributed along the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico (REFORMA, n.d.).

According to figures from 2022, 19% of the population in the U.S. is Hispanic (the term used by the U.S. Census Bureau,) corresponding to 63.7 million people (Lopez et al., 2023). The latest official report issued by ALA regarding demographic data of librarians, *Diversity Counts*, reported in 2012 that librarians of Latin American origins in the U.S. were 3.1%. A recent ITHAKA S+R report cites data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimating that the percentage of librarians of Hispanic origin was 8% in 2022, though using a more granular set, the authors of this report calculate the percentage as 6.95% (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023). Although this figure suggests an improvement, there is still a substantial gap in the representation of this population in librarianship. What accounts for the limited representation of LLAH? What are some of the challenges of being an LLAH in a majority White profession? Participation in professional associations can support librarians in developing a sense that they belong to the field. How does belonging to the ALA and REFORMA associations relate to their sense of belonging within librarianship? This case study explores the topic by using specific Latine librarians who are active in both LIS associations.

Purpose/Central Question

The purpose of this case study is to understand how LLAH experience a sense of belonging within librarianship based on their dual identity as members of the professional association of REFORMA, and the ALA. At this stage of the research, sense of belonging is generally defined as the experience of a person's involvement in a system or organization so that they feel they are an integral part of the organization (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). *Latin American heritage* is defined as people who self-identify as possessing cultural heritage from Latin American countries, whether it is from their own geographical origin or that of their family members.

The study's central question is: How do librarians of Latin American origin describe their dual experience in library professional associations as librarians and people of color?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Librarians of diverse backgrounds have traditionally sought avenues to make their voices heard in a field where they are underrepresented. For this study, the review of the literature focused on three aspects: lack of diversity in LIS, professional organizations, and sense of belonging. Studies related to the lack of diversity in LIS serve as framework for the struggles of librarians of color to achieve a sense of belonging in the field. A background review on the professional associations, the organizational influence of ALA, the NALCo, and particularly REFORMA, provides context for LLAH involvement. And finally, the theory of sense of belonging serves to theoretically frame the study.

Lack of Diversity in LIS

Efforts to make librarianship a more diverse profession in the United States have been documented throughout the years. In the long history since the creation of the ALA, a preponderantly White leadership has steered the professional circles (Wiegand, 2015), but there have been efforts by librarians of color to provide more representation and to make their voices heard (Josey, 1970; Trejo, 1969). In the second half of the twentieth century, the ALA implemented various initiatives and programs aimed at creating a more representative professional field, addressing the documented lack of diversity within the profession (Chu, 1995; Josey, 1993) and ethnic associations or caucuses were created (Adkins et al., 2020; Echavarría & Wertheimer, 1997). Librarians and leaders of Latin American origins have been part of these efforts, as demonstrated by the creation of REFORMA in 1971 (Dawson, 1990). The subsequent advocacy work of leaders in these associations resulted in new programs and initiatives, such as the institution of the ALA Spectrum Scholarship for library students of minority backgrounds in 1997 (Martinez, 2020; McCook, 2000).

Many scholars who documented the lack of diversity in the 1990s emphasized data related to professional recruitment and LIS education. Several publications from the 1990 and early 2000s review data on diversity in terms of faculty and graduates (e.g., Adkins & Espinal, 2004; McCook & Geist, 1993; McCook & Lippincott, 1997). Starting in the mid-2000s, authors explored the experiences of BIPOC librarians in the profession (e.g., Abdullahi, 2007; Honma, 2005; Jaeger & Franklin, 2007). A special issue of *Library Trends* provided an “overview of the efforts of African-Americans, Asian/Pacific Islander-Americans, Chinese Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans to develop services, identify important issues, foster leadership, and establish inclusive definitions of identity” (McCook, 2000, p. 1). The authors of some of those essays were important leaders and/or scholars from each of the associations, including Lotsee Patterson, Kenneth Yamashita, Mengwiong Liu, Alma Dawson, Edward Erazo, Salvador Güereña, Sandra Ríos Balderrama, and others.

Since then, the publication of studies aimed at describing the efforts to increase diversity in the field has continued, with research focusing on different aspects, including LIS education, LIS curriculum, recruitment of librarians of color, retention, special initiatives, and summaries of all those efforts (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Cooke & Minarik, 2016; Jaeger & Hill, 2016; Kim & Sin, 2008; Kumasi & Hill, 2013; McCook, 1998; Mestre, 2010; Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010).

Building off the landmark “Virtuous Circle” article (Jaeger & Franklin, 2007), Jaeger and others look at expanding diversity, inclusion, and equity into new contexts (Jaeger et al., 2015), presenting a broad approach that situates the topic in new contexts, including social justice.

Other studies approached the topic from different angles, such as the low morale of librarians of color (Kendrick & Damasco, 2019), motivations of BIPOC to enter the field (Hussey, 2009), or from specific types of libraries, such as academic librarians (Gonzalez-Smith et al., 2014). Some scholars continued exploring the topic, adding a more critical view of white privilege and the role of white librarianship in the persistent marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and Librarians of Color (Espinal, 2001; Gohr, 2017). A survey of the efforts to increase diversity published in 2021 summarized previous work and concluded that more and newer research was needed (Poole et al., 2021).

Professional Organizations

The history of librarianship in the United States and the history of the ALA are intertwined. The year of the nation's centennial, 1876, marks the creation of ALA but also other watershed events that prompted the professionalization of librarianship (Wiegand, 2015). Historically led by White librarians, ALA struggled with racial inclusion throughout its history. In a historical overview of the ALA for the 1876-1972 period, Thomison chronicles, among other things, the Post-War issues that the association faced, including structural changes and reorganization due to new needs and historical events. Years later, the association faced many societal and internal challenges during the Civil Rights period. This period saw the work of the Social Responsibilities Round Table, the birth of the Office for Service to the Disadvantaged (later Office for Library Outreach Services), the Association's dealing with racial integration, and state chapter relations (Thomison, 1978; Wiegand, 2015).

The founding of the ethnic caucuses of ALA (the five associations representing Black, Chinese, Indigenous, Asian/Pacific, and Latine librarians) has been studied in different overviews (Adkins et al., 2015; Echavarria & Wertheimer, 1997; Hines, 2020) including the role of founders such as E. J. Josey and Arnulfo Trejo. More specifically related to this study is the history of the national association that serves LLAH, REFORMA, which has been chronicled in Dawson (1990), Güereña (1990), and Güereña and Erazo (2000), among other works. REFORMA published a newsletter between 1973-2011 that serves as a documented overview of the association's work throughout its history. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of REFORMA in 2021 resulted in several publications in different formats, including video, lecture, and articles (Long, 2023; REFORMA, 2023; USF School of Information, 2022). There is, however, a lack of documentation regarding specific influential leaders of the organization, except for a memoir written by Elizabeth Martinez (2020), who co-founded REFORMA with Arnulfo Trejo and others, and a few summaries of their legacy or tributes in the association's newsletter mentioned before. In addition, most of the publications related to REFORMA focus on the work of the association as an entity. However, there has not been research conducted related to its members, issues of membership in the association, or the social identity of Latine librarians.

Sense of Belonging Theory

To situate the understanding of Librarians of Latin American Heritage (LLAH) and how they experience their role in these organizations and in the field, this study resorted to theoretical frameworks from social psychology. Tajfel's *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) is often used to frame topics of identity and belonging of individuals to social groups (Tajfel, 1974). Based on Tajfel's theory, Hogg, et al. (2012) developed a new theory of *Intergroup Relational Identity* that helps explain the dynamics in play within leadership or organizations.

At the individual level, Ashforth and Mael (1989) have applied SIT to the identification of members of an organization who feel a part of it. Departing from the premise that “according to SIT people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort” (p. 20), Ashforth and Mael address the concepts of “social identification” and “group identification” as related to how the individuals perceive themselves as belonging to that group. They summarize what they call “antecedents” that increase the tendency of individuals to identify with a group (distinctiveness, prestige, and salience of the out-group) and “consequences” of relevance to organizations. The application of those characteristics to what they call “Organizational Socialization” can be used to understand the perception of Latine librarians as members of their ethnic association, REFORMA, compared to the general library association, ALA. Strayhorn (2008) took this model one step further to develop an analysis of the sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) of Latine students in higher education, which is also related to this study.

Studies on the sense of belonging have been applied in various contexts, including in higher education and students of color (Strayhorn, 2019). Ashmore et al. (2001) address social identification and the *essence* of the categories with which individuals identify. “The assimilation and contrast processes underlying category formation and accentuation are independent of any self-involvement in the category system. Just as one can acquire a concept of ‘apple,’ which may include a representation of the prototypic member of the category, a theory of the ‘essence’ of apples, and an understanding of the variability among exemplars of the category, so one can acquire similar conceptualizations of social objects such as ‘librarian’ or ‘African American’” (Ashmore et al., 2001, p. 20). This model of social identification and theories of a sense of belonging have been applied to some careers, like the sense of belonging within STEM careers (Strayhorn, 2023) or specific college levels, like graduate or undergraduate students (Curtin et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). Soito and Jankowski (2023) applied the theory to academic librarians and professional organizations, but not concerning librarians from specific cultures or ethnicities. Therefore, in this study, we seek to understand the librarians’ responses related to their cultural heritage and the professional organizations to which they belong.

Research Methods and Procedures

The central question, again, is: How do librarians of Latin American origin describe their dual experience in library professional associations as librarians and people of color? This study is framed by an interpretive, critical-theory framework to situate the topic of ethnic identity and power struggles. Critical-theory perspectives seek to address issues of race, class, and gender, and to empower individuals to bring about change in society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This framework is particularly relevant for the aims of this research, given the ontological belief that power and identity struggles have an influence on reality and the axiological belief that the experiences of different communities (in this case Latine) have an intrinsic value based on the diversity of their members (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher’s purpose is to help understand and describe the experiences of Latine librarians and provide information about the issue from their perspective, with the intent of empowering members of the studied group to play an active role in librarianship. In addition, the epistemological assumption in critical theories posits that social structures can be studied from the perspective of control and power and that reality can be changed through research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This case study seeks to document these issues to contribute to a call to action for more active participation of Latine librarians in the professional field.

Positionality

Both authors identify as LLAH, as are the participants that were interviewed. They are also active members of REFORMA. As such, the authors acknowledge a shared identity with the study subjects and a personal interest in the topic of diversity in the field of librarianship. In addition, the authors acknowledge that it is possible that there were previous professional interactions between some of the individuals participating in the study or other individuals that might be mentioned due to all being members of the same organizations. Confidentiality and anonymization of any data reported are intended to neutralize any possibilities of identification by the readers.

Method

This research consists of a case study. This approach was selected because it is a qualitative approach in which the researcher investigates a real-life, contemporary case, through “detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” and the researcher “reports a case description and case themes” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96). In this instance, the case consists of purposefully selected individuals who satisfy specific criteria. These individuals are defined by these parameters, including time (present) and location (U.S.) forming what is called a bounded case. As the intent is to provide in-depth descriptions and understanding of the case, multiple sources of data were analyzed.

The data corpus consists of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with eight identified LLAH, active leaders in both REFORMA and ALA and several official documents from the organizations’ archives and websites. The interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform, and the audio was transcribed and anonymized. Both sources of data (interviews and documents) were analyzed using thematic analysis parameters (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Initial coding was conducted using NVivo 14 software.

The study was approved by the University of Missouri’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the case number 2098750MU.

Procedure and Data Sources

Interviews

The first step was identifying and purposefully selecting individuals with a criterion sampling method. The criterion was that they had to be active members of REFORMA and ALA (that is, the ethnic association and the general association). “Active” is defined as having a leadership position in both associations (currently or in the past). Interviews with people under these conditions pose some ethical concerns that were considered. The identity of the librarians interviewed were kept confidential by substituting their real names with a pseudonym in all the records kept by the researcher, including the analysis and findings.

Eligible participants (identified through insiders in the organizations) were contacted and invited to participate. One person declined. All the individuals who agreed were sent an official invitation with information on the project and a consent form. Virtual interviews were arranged and conducted through the Zoom platform. The interviews varied between 22 and 54 minutes, averaging 35 minutes. The participants interviewed consisted of LLAH; however, while other

demographic information was recorded with the intention of including a variety of experiences, data points such as the number of years in the associations or positions held are not reported in this article to avoid possible identification, due to the small number of professionals in the field with these characteristics.

Documents

To provide a complete picture of the experience of these librarians in both organizations, we looked at primary documents that portray the associations, especially their mission, vision, goals, and membership benefits. Both associations' websites provided some information regarding their goals and membership, but the official documents were identified in the associations' digital archives: ALA Archives at the University of Illinois and REFORMA Archives at California State Los Angeles, found in these online web pages:

- ALA Archives: <https://www.library.illinois.edu/ala/>
- REFORMA Archives: <https://digitalcollections.calstatela.edu/luna/servlet/CalStateLA>

The archivist at ALA Archives assisted by retrieving and digitizing some documents. REFORMA Archives mainly contain digitized newsletters, therefore the "About Us" page of the website was also consulted. From all the documents retrieved, a data set of six documents was selected, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Documents (n=6)

Identification	Title	Retrieved from
D1	ALA Constitution (Affiliates section: Article X)	https://www.library.illinois.edu/ala/
D2	ALA Policy Manual	https://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/handbook
D3	REFORMA Bylaws	https://www.reforma.org/files/REFORMA%20Bylaws%202021.pdf
D4	About REFORMA	https://reforma.org/about

D5	REFORMA Newsletter, June 1973 (v.1, no.1)	https://digitalcollections.calstatela.edu/luna/servlet/s/80i77b
D6	ALA Strategic Directions, 2015 (updated 2017)	https://www.ala.org/aboutala/strategicplan

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were coded and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The same process was repeated for the five documents. The six analysis phases described by Braun and Clarke were followed for both data sets. They consisted of an initial identification of the data, initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, defining, and naming themes in an iterative process, which resulted in the identification of themes based on the research question. Elements from the theoretical framework of social identity and sense of belonging were used to analyze the themes in the last phase of analysis, and these findings are reported in the discussion.

Validation/Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of the research study, several measures were implemented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For credibility, prolonged engagement with the content was used, looking for redundancies and coding in several rounds until saturation was achieved. Transferability was addressed by writing rich descriptions. Dependability was addressed in the transcription process and the filing, as well as by uploading transcripts to the NVivo computer software for the initial coding round. Confirmability was addressed by establishing the positionality of researchers and by determining saturation.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study, as well as the decision to follow a case study approach, determined that the number of participants interviewed was small due to the size of the population of LLAH who satisfied the criteria. Therefore, the small sample size poses a limitation regarding the comprehensiveness of the data. However, the sample size is not a limitation regarding the depth of analysis. Confidentiality of participants was addressed, but that could have also limited participation. The number of LLAHs who are active in leadership in both REFORMA and ALA is very narrow, so some members might have chosen not to participate. Even with considerations like redacting names, origin, geographical location, and the positions held, some individuals might have been reticent to participate. On the other hand, the definition of the population as participants who are active in both REFORMA and ALA means that the voices of LLAH who participate in only one or neither group are excluded from this research.

Another limitation was time. This study could have benefitted from analyzing additional undigitized documents as well as using other data sources, such as observations. Attending professional conferences of either REFORMA or ALA and being able to observe LLAH participating in the meetings could have been beneficial, but due to the data collection taking place in the fall and in a year when REFORMA did not host a national conference, no in-person events could be observed.

Findings

The interviews and the analysis of the documents demonstrate that the participants in this case study of LLAH are committed professionals. They have a core mission of serving their communities, which motivates them to participate in professional associations like REFORMA and ALA. The analysis of their responses and the documents selected paints a descriptive picture of what it means to be an LLAH within the LIS field in the United States. The themes of community and belonging were embedded throughout, and it served as the common thread to guide the naming of themes, occurring in an almost successive progression.

The following three themes (depicted in Figure 1) were identified:

1. *Identity: Finding community.* LLAH experience their dual (or multiple) identities by finding shared values and goals among the diverse group of peers within Latine communities to balance their identity with that of being part of the broader ethnic community (individual versus social).
2. *Familia: Creating community.* That shared experience creates a community that provides them with support when facing challenges resulting from their identity and acting as a facilitator for involvement in the wider field. The relationships and ties among other LLAHs provide a family-type network.
3. *Belonging: Community as support system.* The community that librarians find in their ethnic-specific association, REFORMA, supports them and contributes to their sense of belonging when interacting with professionals in at-large associations like ALA; it cements their identity and helps them connect to others.

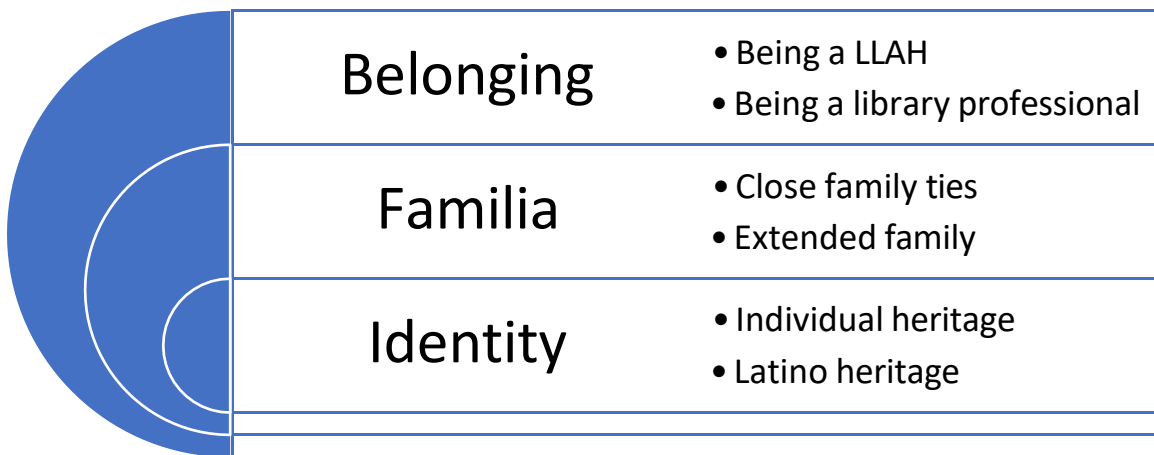


Figure 1. Librarians of Latin American Heritage (LLAH) Experience in Professional Associations

These themes are described below in order from inside to outside, demonstrating how each level of the graphic in Figure 1 is encompassed by the broader scope of the next level.

Identity: Finding Community

All the participants interviewed described their identity in different ways. They were all “librarians of Latin American heritage,” but they used different terms to self-identify. Some terms used were Latino, Latina, Chicana, Afro-Latine, Mixed-race Hispanic, etc. Some of them also used the specific country of origin of their family combined with the U.S. (e.g., Mexican American), even if they were born in the U.S. In addition to the way they identified, they all manifested a deep need to clarify that Latine are a diverse group. As one of the participants, Lisa, stated:

Sometimes people group with others that they have more in common. And like I said, we’re all Latinos but we’re not all the same. We’re from different cultures, places, some were born here, some were born in other countries and came in, some speak Spanish, ... I don’t know, some use Spanglish a lot. So, I guess what I mean it’s, because we’re all Latino we don’t ... we’re not all the same. (Lisa)

In addition to differences of origin, the participants emphasized intersectionality as an important consideration when referring to people in REFORMA. Intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1991) in her feminist research of Black women, and expanded by Collins (2019), focuses on the intersections of race and gender. It “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). More recently, the concept has been expanded to include other identities besides race and gender. That was pointed out by participants:

I think it's always harder, the more identities you have and some of them might be invisible. So, like someone could be neuro divergent, ... and some might not know, right? When you're a woman, and a woman of color, there's... it's like a double-edged sword. (Julia)

Document #5 was the first newsletter published by REFORMA in 1973. In it, there is a report from a strategic planning meeting of the first leaders of the organization. The experience described by the participants in our study demonstrates, 50 years after that foundational meeting, that REFORMA provides opportunities to embrace its diversity. Arnulfo Trejo, Robert Haro, John Ayala, and other original leaders of REFORMA wrote in their 1973 report: “Pluralism is important in this kind of organization as is democracy – everyone must have the opportunity to state his point of view” (REFORMA, 1973, p. 3).

However, after making clear the diversity within their group, the participants emphasized what they have in common as LLAH members of REFORMA. The shared values and goal of better library services for Latine communities were at the core of their experience in REFORMA. The shared goal unites them, no matter if they are from a different culture or country, generation, citizenship status, etc.

It's like I'm surrounded by people that share my same... my same values and opinions, and I find that to be comforting and rewarding, and again being able... to use these folks... to work with them on coming up with ideas or better ways to serve the community. (Diego)

One participant summarized the importance of maintaining their individual identity while also relating to the broader picture of “Latinidad,” that is, Latine cultural identity. This duality was mentioned as a dynamic characteristic that requires them to balance when to focus on their individuality (e.g., “Cuban American”) or their shared identity (e.g., “Latina”). A participant stated that in the library field, they always use the term “Latina librarian” instead of their country-specific label, “because I am part of a larger group. In my professional identity, I am Latina” (Maggie).

Lisa stated the same sentiment:

Well, see, in the organization [REFORMA], when we are working on some project, we all have the same goal. We're working for the same thing, to promote library services to Latinos, so that brings all of us together. [Later this participant repeated:] That's what makes us feel part of something... something bigger, because we are all working together for something... for our communities. (Lisa)

This sentiment was also forecasted in the early REFORMA documents:

In opening remarks to the group, Dr. Trejo, president of REFORMA, addressed the problem of effecting change in the library profession and noted that over the years Spanish speaking librarians “waited quietly, hoping that the status quo would change... silently questioned policies and work procedures. We have seen libraries measured by standards which, in our opinion, fall short in fulfilling the needs of our people. We have seen library schools accredited without a single course in the curriculum which would prepare librarians to serve the several million Spanish speaking residents of the United States. And so, we continue to see Chicanos, Cubanos, Puerto Ricans, and many other Spanish-speaking people deprived of services and information which libraries could provide if they were equipped with the right materials and staffed by qualified librarians.” (REFORMA, 1973, p. 2)

The REFORMA Familia: Creating Community

Within REFORMA, the LLAH interviewed found a group of people with shared goals, and that group quickly became their community. The term *familia* (family in Spanish) was used by several interviewees, even when the interviews were conducted in English. All the participants emphasized that they rely on their REFORMA family for support, for networking, for asking questions, and for getting help in challenging situations:

It's provided my professional foundation ... throughout my lifetime. I have people that I can turn to. There are such accomplished and talented people in REFORMA. And they're so willing to share their knowledge, help you out, because ultimately, we're all in it to serve our communities. (Maggie)

One participant expanded the *familia* metaphor to explain how REFORMA opened the doors to other ethnic associations and the field at large:

[REFORMA] is the close family. You have your close family. And then through the close family, you're going to have cousins and larger relations. So, it's like a family network, you know. It becomes, to a point. Because then, representing REFORMA, you're welcomed by APALA, you're welcomed by [other associations] ..., you know everybody else, and then your family starts growing and growing and growing. So, you start from your own. (Maggie)

Another participant also referred to this opening toward broader connections:

It's an extensive network. I feel like I know people across the United States that I can turn to... if I need something, I have a question, I can turn to them, and I've worked with them on different projects over the years. It's just an amazing experience. (Angel)

Networking is an explicit goal of many professional associations. The “About REFORMA” page on the website lists the organization’s goals in the first paragraph. In that list, it states “the establishment of a national information and support network among individuals who share our goals” (REFORMA, n.d.). Goals and purposes of ethnic associations like REFORMA are important, because ALA’s Constitution states that, to be accepted as their affiliate, they consider “any national or international organization *having purposes similar* to those of the Association or its subdivisions” (American Library Association, n.d., Article X, Section 1, emphasis added).

The ALA Constitution does not state specific goals, as those are usually stated in recurrent strategic plans. An analysis of the association’s Strategic Plan from 2015/2017 uncovered the collaboration of peers, and this is included under the “Professional Development” section: “Peer-to-peer learning/interaction facilitated by ALA helps members reach their goals” (American Library Association, 2017).

However, as we will discuss in the next theme, REFORMA members mentioned having difficulty networking and interacting in ALA or other at-large associations.

Belonging: Representing the Community

In the interviews, the participants shared several examples of discriminatory experiences in professional associations at large, like ALA and others. Episodes of microaggressions as well as

overtly racist comments were shared. Some examples mentioned included a White non-Hispanic person in an ALA committee telling a native Spanish-speaker that their accent when pronouncing a Spanish name was incorrect; another person suggesting that the PhD in the badge of a librarian with a Hispanic name was wrongly printed, because of assumptions of them not being a doctor, and someone in a leadership position insinuating that a REFORMA leader could have problems affording the cost of an event (from interviews with Diego, Julia, and Laura).

The participants also described other challenges within ALA: the size and structure (or bureaucracy) of the association would almost be insurmountable, if it weren't for the support of their fellow REFORMA members. Most participants shared that, at some point, they felt intimidated by the organization:

Sometimes... It's not as comfortable. It was hard to feel included... welcome. It was a little more awkward for me. Now that I've been around longer, I know more people. I don't feel as much of that. But definitely when I was younger, ... It was intimidating. (Maggie)

At the same time, relying on their REFORMA community to navigate these challenges was experienced by all the participants:

... and I have to be honest with you. It was REFORMA... it was my REFORMA colleagues that were always the ones who reached out, who reached out and welcomed me, (...) who were also long time REFORMA members, who approached me at my first meeting and made sure like, did I have any questions? Did I know what to do? Where to sit? Where do I pick up my materials? And kind of guided me through those first few meetings, to make sure that I felt aware and included. So again, you know, my REFORMA family was there to help me through those initial meetings. (Laura)

Even if someone did not experience discriminatory practices themselves, they acknowledged that the work done by other REFORMA leaders paved the way for them.

And yeah, so the conversation for me was always easy, and I always thank the ones that came before me that made it for me to have easier conversations, and to be... I did not have to struggle to be included, because somebody [name of a previous REFORMA leader] had already done that. (Rosa)

Through the framework of sense of belonging, Strayhorn states that “sense of belonging consists of both cognitive and affective elements. An individual assesses his/her position or role in relation to the group (cognitive), which in turn results in a response, behavior, or outcome (affective)” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 28). The participants’ knowledge that within REFORMA they are connected, they have common goals and values, and the support of the community results in a behavior or outcome that allows them to actively participate in an organization such as ALA. In one interview, Diego demonstrated the connection between the cognitive and affective aspects of sense of belonging,

It's like I'm surrounded by people [*cognitive*] that share my same... values and opinions, and I find that to be comforting and rewarding [*affective*], and again being able to use these folks... to work with them on coming up with ideas or better ways to serve the community. (Diego, emphasized terms added)

Librarians in this study found their community and a sense of belonging in their group of REFORMA peers that helped them deal with the intimidating or challenging (even discriminatory) experiences at large. As Strayhorn explains:

For instance, belonging needs take on increased significance in environments or situations that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as in contexts where certain individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed. (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 19-20)

Having that cognitive and affective sense of belonging in the field, that there is room for them, and they can act on their sense of belonging with the support of their community allows some REFORMA members to step up for leadership positions in associations at large. Within their REFORMA *familia*, the community they found was the support they needed when facing challenging situations in a broader and more intimidating association like ALA.

Conclusions

The themes identified through this case study demonstrate both the challenges of being an LLAH in the U.S. and the mechanisms that the professional associations can use to provide this group of librarians of color the conditions needed for their participation and leadership. LLAH experience dual or, as they made clear, multiple identities. Diversity within LLAH librarians is not always understood, but they are a very diverse, intersectional group. Being treated as a monolith does not help them feel seen. Discrimination, microaggressions, and the size and rigidity of national LIS associations make LLAH members feel intimidated from participating fully. However, having the support of the REFORMA community contributes to a sense of belonging within the profession, which in turn translates to more participation and leadership.

This study, conducted with a critical theory interpretive framework, seeks to describe the experiences of LLAH as members and leaders in professional organizations. Our main question was, how do librarians of Latin American origin describe their dual experience in library professional associations as librarians and people of color? The librarians' descriptions included issues with diversity within Latine identities, they provided examples of barriers, and explained how membership and active participation in REFORMA help them confront those problems. They highlighted the challenges of having not just dual but multiple identities that affect their participation in the field, including aspects that contribute to or hinder their sense of belonging. The duality of their individual and social identities or belonging to a narrow group versus a broader community, is balanced across their professional involvement. One of the leaders interviewed summarized this experience as a piece of advice to newer LLAH:

You have to open up, but always take your province, your “*cuna*” (cradle) with you. Always be willing and wanting to grow and to bring in new experiences, new knowledge, and be part of the larger professional family ... You cannot stay provincial. And that's how you have a larger impact, because you don't just serve Latino communities. You serve the entire community. (Maggie)

Implications

Any professional association in LIS could benefit from these findings. Most associations like ALA, its divisions, and other national LIS associations at large have goals and objectives related to

increasing the diversity of their memberships. Those goals stated in documents such as Strategic Plans and Mission Statements will not translate to practice if librarians who are BIPOC do not feel like they belong. By looking at what ethnic associations like REFORMA are doing that creates that sense of community, larger groups can improve their members' experiences and professional environments.

Other more specific associations or professional associations that unite specific identities within librarianship (e.g., LGBTQIA+ groups) can also benefit from the descriptions of these LLAH experiences to promote and ensure a sense of belonging within their group. In addition, all groups of librarians who are BIPOC, including the other four national associations of librarians of color, have opportunities to collaborate and work on this goal of ensuring belonging together, through coalitions such as the Joint Council of Librarians of Color or, as a participant stated, through their role as the "extended family" (Maggie).

There are also implications for LIS education in terms of helping students of color develop their sense of *familia*. In addition to introducing the existence of associations that support cultural heritage, LIS educators can discuss the creation of professional support networks as a strategy for professional socialization. Employers also can use these findings to help provide their new BIPOC librarians a sense of belonging within their workplaces by creating affiliate groups within the workplace and encouraging employees to participate in area chapters of REFORMA and other NALCos. Helping LIS students and new professionals overcome isolation and develop a sense of belonging is one potential way to improve the retention of BIPOC librarians.

Further Research

Although this study sought to comprehensively describe this particular case, the research on this topic is very sparse. As stated in the literature review, there are few studies on LLAH in the profession or about other specific ethnic groups. Most research addresses "diversity" in general, and there is a need to understand the particular characteristics of specific groups, especially each identity within BIPOC librarians.

Sense of belonging was used only as a framework to define and understand these librarians' perceptions of their role in the field, but other studies could explore this theory more in depth to address belonging to the profession. Most research on this theory addresses those belonging to schools, colleges, universities, and other careers, like STEM or nursing. However, despite several studies on morale in LIS (Kendrick & Damasco, 2019), there is a gap in the research literature on applying a sense of belonging to LIS. In addition, most of the studies in this area are quantitative, where more qualitative studies could contribute a different angle to the findings.

LLAH constitutes an important group in the LIS field, and more research could be conducted regarding this particular group of librarians. As stated before, the representation of Latine in librarianship, compared to that of the population in general, is abysmal. Although this paper provides a very small contribution to understanding that phenomenon, more research is needed to achieve a more diverse and representative cadre of library professionals, beyond mentions in mission statements.

Endnotes

¹ About language choice: The terms “Latino” and “Latina” are gendered terms typically used to refer to a person with Latin American heritage. This paper uses the more inclusive variation, “Latine,” and the neutral LLAH, except in direct quotes from participants or materials. The U.S. Census uses the term Hispanic, which is included when citing statistics.

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Alicia K. Long (alicia.k.long@missouri.edu) is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Missouri, School of Information Science & Learning Technologies, and a Visiting Assistant Instructor at the University of South Florida, School of Information. Ms. Long has worked as an academic librarian and supervisor and developed bilingual public library programs for youth and family literacy. A member and leader in several professional associations including REFORMA, Ms. Long's interests and research focus on multicultural and diverse literature for youth, library services to diverse communities, human rights, and diversity in LIS education.

Denice Adkins (adkinsde@missouri.edu) is a professor and associate director of the School of Information Science & Learning Technologies, at the University of Missouri. Her research interests include public libraries, services to the Latinx community and other underserved populations, reader advisory research, and youth services. Before her academic career, Dr. Adkins was a public librarian serving diverse communities in the southwestern United States. Additionally, her past experiences include a Fulbright Scholarship to Honduras, a Fulbright Specialist to India, as well as serving as president and treasurer of REFORMA, the executive board for the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), and councilor-at-large for the American Library Association.



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