**Who Am I? How Public Library Staff Manage Conflicting Information about the Self-Concept**

# ABSTRACT

**Purpose**
Information represents the building blocks for identity construction, yet it is also full of contradictions and conflict. This is particularly true in the workplace, where workers must navigate conflicting information about their own standpoint on who they are, would ideally be, or should be, and the standpoint of management, customers, and colleagues. This study considers how staff working in public libraries deal with conflicting identity-relevant information, as well as the outcome of these approaches.

**Methodology**
21 public library staff members recorded a series of 5 audio diaries about their frustrations in routine library work. They then participated in a 45-minute semi-structured interview intended to follow up on topics discussed in the diaries.

**Findings**
Participants employed several conflict management styles when confronted with conflicting information about the self-concept, including dominating, obliging, integrating, compromising, and avoiding. They adopted a dynamic approach, using different styles and combinations of styles to construct a working self-concept. Outcomes for most of these styles were mixed.

**Originality**
While a significant amount of research has considered library identity, fewer studies have considered how staff actively construct their self-concept within the context of professional practice.  By contributing to a better understanding of identity-relevant information and how library staff navigate it, the current study supports the profession's efforts to a) recognize problematic identity information, b) revise routines in which this information is present, and c) train staff on the use of different strategies and inform them of the potential outcomes of each strategy.

**Keywords**: Routine dynamics, information practice, identity work, libraries

# INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental questions any person can ask is, "Who am I?"Answers to this question link people to a social structure and common culture, with its shared understanding of what it means to be a dad, a student, a librarian, etc. (Stets and Burke, 2014). Answers require constant work, as people attempt to form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise "the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). This means that they are rarely simple or easy to come by. This is particularly true for librarianship—whose identity construction Pierson *et al.* (2019) suggested is in crisis. A librarian's self-concept is typically defined by things like service, professionalism, advocacy, social justice, and ethics (Hicks, 2014, Pierson *et al.*, 2019, Irvin, 2021). Yet, it is also influenced by specific times, places, and people. Advocating for a relational understanding of identity, Klein and Lenart (2020) suggest that "one is a librarian by virtue of one's relations to

library users" (p. 14). This would suggest that there are as many answers to the identity question as there are library users. Answers shift in response to technological shifts (Nelson and Irwin, 2014; Hicks, 2014), further muddying a librarian's sense of self. Irvin (2021) found that answers were also shaped by fear and distrust because of factors like patron apathy, lack of administrative support, sexual harassment, and feelings of inadequacy and ill-preparation.

Identity construction is additionally complex for library staff with identities that are under-represented in the profession, typically defined by their proximity to *whiteness*: "The normativity of whiteness works insidiously, invisibly, to create binary categorizations of people as either acceptable to whiteness and therefore normal or different and therefore other" (Hathcock, 2015, n.p.). Gonzalez-Smith *et al*. (2014) found that the sense of self among academic librarians of color was influenced by their experiences of racism and feelings of otherness. BIPOC staff often face pressures to "hide parts of themselves to remain viable in their careers" (Ossom-Williamson *et al*., 2021, p. 140). Fear of stigmatization and shame can keep staff with mental illnesses from disclosing their diagnosis (Burns and Green, 2019). Fearing the consequences of disclosure, staff with disabilities may forgo important accommodations (George, 2020). Howland (2001) found that marginalized staff in a multicultural library faced intense pressure to conform to the versions of themselves preferred by others.

A better understanding of library staff identities is needed. Gonzalez-Smith *et al.* (2014) urged researchers and practitioners to consider the professional, racial, and ethnic identities of staff, noting that equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives are strengthened by learning more about who staff are. Yet, much of the research on library identity has conflated identity with image—i.e., it considers the influence of others' perception rather than a description of staff selves within professional practices (Hicks, 2014, p. 252). This study adds to research on library identity by considering how staff construct a working self-concept when information about their own standpoint on their identity conflicts with information about someone else's standpoint.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Identity Information and the Construction of Self
A person's identity construction is centered around who they are as a unique person, as a member of a social group, or as someone occupying a specific role (Stets and Burke, 2005). Information is central to this ongoing construction. Research on socialization processes, for instance, considers how a newcomer to an organization "acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role" (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, p. 211). This transition period is marked by varying states of certainty, and workers depend on information to clarify their role and reduce uncertainty (Miller and Jablin, 1991). They also depend on information in the form of feedback to know how they are doing and what they may need to correct (Saks and Gruman, 2012). These reflected appraisals are important in a person's assessment of whether others see them as they see themselves (Davis *et al*., 2019). Yet, rather than increase sense, identity-relevant information may also result in what Dervin (1998) called sense-unmaking. Ashforth and Schnioff (2016) referred to this as sense-breaking, which occurs when workers encounter challenges to the self that create gaps in meaning.

Identity-relevant information comes from codified information, workplace instruction, asking questions, observation, and direct experience (Ashforth and Rogers, 2012). Thus, a person's "constructing of the working self-concept" is informed by *situationally salient* internal and external information (Gonnerman *et al.*, 2000, p. 810). This fits Self-Concept Discrepancy Theory's (SCDT) distinction between the self and others. According to SCDT, a person's sense of self relates to different *domains of* and *standpoints on* the self—informed by themselves and others (Higgens *et al.*, 1985; Higgins, 1987). Domains of the self include the attributes a person actually possesses, the attributes they would ideally like to possess, and the attributes they believe they are obligated to possess. Standpoints on the self refer to the perspectives from which the domains of self are judged—either one's own personal standpoint or the standpoint of someone else. In other words, a person has their own perspective of who they are, would like to be, or should be, but they are also aware of the perspectives of important others on these same matters. To construct the self-concept, people consider "the interrelation among different pieces of information about the actual self" (Higgens, 1987).

Internal information provides the standpoint of the self, sourced from a person's ongoing narratives and their "previous experience and toolkit of extant and contextually diverse identities" (Ashforth and Schnioff, 2016). It is stored within people as memories of previous experiences or direct observation of current experiences (Ramkissoon and Nunkoo, 2012; Okoniewski *et al.*, 2014). External information provides the standpoint of others and is sourced from the environment (Ramkissoon, 2012). This information is provided to workers through *sensegiving*, whereby organizations provide information about prototypical and aspirational identities to influence a worker's identity construction (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). External information may include explicit or subtle clues that suggest social validation of one's identity, including rewards and punishments, feedback, and inclusion or exclusion in social activities (Ashforth and Schnioff, 2016).

Thus, identity construction is comprised of several information practices, defined as information work that is "constituted socially and dialogically, rather than based on the ideas and motives of individual actors" (Talja *et al.*, 2005). Identity is not an individual construction but is rather embedded within the goals, motivations, norms, and expectations of various actors. It occurs within a negotiated, emergent, embedded, and materially mediated area of knowing (Gherardi, 2009, Nicolini *et al.*, 2003). Constructing identity in the midst of conflicting, changing, and ever-present identity-relevant information involves information seeking, use, synthesis, and sharing. Notions of the most effective and appropriate ways to carry out this information work are constituted locally (Lloyd, 2010).

**Conflicting Information about the Self-Concept**
Internal and external information about the self does not always align, as different combinations of domains and standpoints can lead to different types of discrepancies, associated emotions, and efforts to resolve the discrepancy (Higgens *et al.*, 1985). For instance, a discrepancy between internal information suggesting who a staff member is and external information suggesting who others want them ideally to be can result in shame and embarrassment. People employ a variety of strategies when confronted with external information that conflicts with their internal beliefs or perceptions about themselves and the attributes they possess. One well-studied strategy is active avoidance, which might include physical avoidance, inattention, biased interpretation,

forgetting, or self-handicapping (Golman *et al.*, 2017). Active avoidance goes beyond total evasion of conflicting identity-relevant information to include what people do after receiving it. In one example of people avoiding conflicting external information about the self-concept, Batson (1975) found that Christian participants increased their belief in the infallibility of the Bible when confronted with a fake news article, that they believed to be true, showing that much of the Bible was fabricated. Bonam *et al.* (2019) found that White participants—driven by a desire to maintain a positive group identity—were not only less aware of historical racism than Black participants but were also less likely to see hypothetical scenarios as racist. In both cases, people sought to actively avoid external information that conflicted with how they saw themselves.

Avoidance is only one of many *styles* a person can adopt to manage conflicting information about the self-concept. The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) operationalizes conflict styles as the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy their own goals and concerns or the goals and concerns of others during a conflict (Rahim, 1983). Dominating seeks a *win-lose* outcome that prioritizes a person's own goals, obliging seeks a *lose-win* outcome that prioritizes the other person's goals, integrating seeks a *win-win* in which the goals of both parties are met, compromise seeks a no-win/no-lose outcome in which both parties give up something, and avoiding seeks to side-step the conflict altogether (Antonioni, 1998). This operationalization is appropriate to the study of conflicting identity standpoints because those standpoints are informed by the goals, aspirations, hopes, and rules of the standpoint source (Higgens *et al.*, 1985). The current study adapts the ROCI-II to consider whether, in response to perceived conflicts, a staff member's construction of their working self-concept is influenced more by internal information about their own standpoint or external information about the standpoints of others.

## Library Identity

Like those in other professions, library workers engage in a shifting and ongoing process of reflection and negotiation around the question of "who are we?" (Nelson and Irwin, 2014). They try to merge internal and external information about the self-concept to craft a working sense of self that is true to both—"Being a librarian is more than a job to me; it is part of my identity" (Gonzalez-Smith et al., 2014). This involves a complex balancing of who they are outside of the profession with who the profession asks them to be through formal and informal education and training, professional associations, and public perceptions (Pierson, 2024; Pierson et al., 2019). The interpretive repertories library workers draw from to construct their identities at work suggest that they are service providers, managing technological change on behalf of users who need librarians to find information, do their jobs, and build communities (Hicks, 2014).

Yet, many workers struggle to craft identities that align with both internal and external identity information. This is because sensegiving within the library profession centers around whiteness, which Hathcock (2015) defined as an ideological marker for privilege and power that labels people as different and excludes them because of that difference. This includes differences in race and ethnicity but can also include differences along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, ability, and social class. Library staff who are marked as different will experience a greater discrepancy between internal and external identity information, and an increasing pressure to shift their own standpoint on the self-concept to match the standpoint of patrons, colleagues, and

management. Irvin et al. (2024) referred to this pressure as "the changing same," describing the experiences of LIS faculty of color who struggle to meet the shifting identity demands of the profession while remaining true to their authentic selves. Being told who they are, excluded, deprioritized, and silenced led to avoidance behaviors, dread, fear, and an internalization of stress that negatively impacted their health.

**Library Routines**
Work routines represent a potentially fruitful area in which to study conflicting identity information. Routines represent a particular type of repetitive workplace practice that tends to follow a similar sequence and is reviewed often for potential improvement (Feldman *et al.*, 2021). In a public library, this includes things like pulling holds, simple reference inquiries, shelf reading, budgeting, opening and closing, and collection maintenance. While these routines produce goods and services, however, they also "(re)produce the social order in which those goods and services have value (Feldman and Pentland, 2022, p. 849). This is played out through the two elements of routine work—the ostensive and performative elements. The ostensive element represents the structure or *patterning* of the work (D'Adderio, 2014), and it includes abstract recipes for work completion (Dionysiou and Tsoukas, 2013). The performative element of routine work represents the application of ostensive routines to practice and reflects variations in performance introduced by the agency of individual workers (Feldman *et al.*, 2021). Merging the study of routines with SCDT and information practice, the ostensive element of a routine can encode information about the expectations for who a staff member ideally is or is obligated to be—either from their own perspective or their sense of someone else's perspective. The performative element can provide information about who a staff member actually is—based on their own perceptions of their performance or the perceived standpoint of others, i.e., reflected appraisal (Stets and Burke, 2005). The current study considers what staff do when these expectations or evaluations conflict.

Based on this previous research, the current study asks the following research questions:
- RQ1: In what ways does internal information about a public library staff member's own standpoint on their identity conflict with external information about the standpoint of others?
- RQ2: How do public library staff manage conflicting information about who they are, who they ideally are, or who they are obligated to be?
- RQ3: What outcomes are associated with different conflict management styles?

## METHODS

The current study adopted an interpretivist orientation to identity, emphasizing the interactions through which people construct their identities (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008) and the situated nature of routine work (Lopez-Cotarelo, 2021). Interpretive research methods enable a deeper understanding of the subjective, constructed, and situated meanings (Kankam, 2019) attached to identity. The specific methods used in the current study include audio diaries and semi-structured interviews. Diary methods are appropriate because they allow research participants to record their experiences and thoughts close to the event, allowing a "life as it is lived" perspective (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). Audio diaries have additional advantages over other diary methods, including the ability to capture subtle shifts in tone and more of a participant's sense-making

process, while typically being easier for participants to complete (Monrouxe, 2009; Markham and Couldry, 2007). Interviews are commonly used alongside diary methods to clarify the meaning of events and aid in analysis and interpretation (Poppleton *et al.*, 2008). Detailed notes were taken as researchers listened to each audio diary and during interviews. These notes were used in the analysis.

**Recruitment and Sample**

After receiving IRB approval for the study, the researchers sent emails and flyers to public libraries spread out throughout the Southeastern United States. The recruitment strategy was centered around larger library systems with several branches, including those in both rural and urban settings. The researchers also traveled to several of these libraries to recruit in person. Participation in the study was open to anyone working full-time in a public library who also identified with an under-represented or marginalized group. Examples provided in recruitment materials included staff of color, staff with disabilities, staff with mental health challenges, and LGBTQIA+ staff. Potential participants first met virtually with the researchers, who provided an overview of the study, answered questions, and obtained participant consent. 34 staff members representing five library systems completed this initial step, after which 21 completed the full study. See Figure 1 for an overview of the participants. While the gender of participants mirrored the large majority of women in the profession, there was a higher representation of staff with other marginalized identity markers as compared to the profession. This includes paraprofessional staff, typically characterized as those without formal library degrees. Given that the identity of library staff is closely linked with the identities suggested by formal education (Pierson et al., 2019), the inclusion of staff without those degrees provides a fuller picture of staff identity.

**Process**

Participants were asked to document times when they engaged in routine work that made them feel stuck, uncomfortable, annoyed, or frustrated. They then recorded audio diaries using the native recording app on their cellphone, following a series of prompts provided by the researchers. The prompts asked them to describe the routine, including where they did it, who else was with them, and what work was involved. Prompts then asked them to describe the obstacle(s) they faced, how they responded, and what the outcome was. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their experience, including how they felt about it and the extent to which their identities played a role in their experience.

Consistent with previous diary studies (Crozier and Cassell, 2016), participants were asked to spend as much or as little time on each entry as they felt they needed. However, due to extreme variations in length, participants were asked halfway through the study to keep their recordings at 5-7 minutes in length. Because participants usually could not record their diaries immediately following one of these events, they were instructed to record them at the end of the day—which typically occurred in their vehicle on the way home or at their home after they arrived. To increase participation and compliance (Crozier and Cassell, 2016; Pilbeam *et al.*, 2016), participants were sent regular reminder emails. Ethical considerations are heightened due to the intimacy of audio diary methods and the way they bring researchers closer to a participant's everyday life (Monrouxe, 2009). To protect confidentiality and limit potential harm caused by talking about troubling issues, participants were instructed that they had complete control over

what they recorded and which recordings they sent to the research team. They could also drop out of the study at any point. Pseudonyms were used, and specific identifiable information was removed from the findings. After the researchers completed an initial analysis of each diary, they invited participants to complete a 45-minute virtual interview, using Zoom, that followed up on certain things noted in the diaries.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data analyzed in the current study included transcripts of audio diary entries and interviews, as well as researcher notes. After downloading the audio diaries from the cloud folder, the researchers uploaded them to a secure folder in Vidgrid—a video hosting site with an automated transcription feature. Virtual interviews were transcribed using Zoom's automated transcription feature. Researchers listened to audio diary and interview recordings in their entirety to edit the transcripts and take notes on developing themes. The data analyzed included 105 audio diaries, 21 interviews, and several pages of notes—all of which were transferred to Nvivo for qualitative coding.

Coding involved the use of template analysis, which is a form of thematic analysis commonly used in diary research (Pilbeam *et al*., 2016; Poppleton *et al*., 2008). Researchers collaborated to construct a list of hierarchically ordered codes that accounted for themes emerging from a detailed reading of transcripts and notes (King, 2012). The template was applied to an initial set of transcripts and finalized after several revisions. The final template was grouped around several main coding categories, including nature of routine, self-standpoint, others' standpoint, nature and source of conflict, conflict workaround, and outcome. The subcategories for conflict workaround were developed using the operationalization of conflict management found in the ROCI-II. Subcategories for a dominating approach included push back, self-expression, and clarifying expectations. Subcategories for an obliging approach included apologizing, masking, and pushing through. Subcategories for an integrating approach included empathy, finding common ground, and redirecting. Subcategories for a compromising approach included following the script, politeness, and half-hearted performance. Subcategories for an avoiding approach included avoidance of physical spaces, confirmation-seeking, and ignoring.

**Figure** 1: Demographic information for study participants.

## FINDINGS

Findings are grouped according to the conflict style a participant used (Table 1).

## Dominating

*Conflict and Style.* In a dominating style, participants constructed a working self-concept based primarily on their own standpoint, at the expense of others' standpoints. This often included the use of verbal communication strategies, as participants shared information about their standpoint, and their prioritization of that standpoint, with others. A patron's request for a document to be notarized without an appointment conflicted with Tessa's sense of obligation to follow library policies. Backed by these policies, she pushed back: "I don't know who you spoke to. I don't know who told you to come in, but that's not how we do things. That's how we used to do things, but that's not how we do it anymore." This suggests that the use of a dominating approach is

more likely for those components of a participant's identity that are formally supported by the organization. When a colleague's efforts to engage April in office gossip conflicted with her sense of boundaries, she reasserted her standpoint by telling them, "Hey, that's really not okay. Like, I understand that you may have some issues with some of our coworkers, but that's not really something I want to get involved in." Ava similarly competed for personal boundaries when a patron asked if she was married: "I said, 'I'm uncomfortable answering that question.'" Thus, participants were more likely to utilize a dominating approach when they established clear boundaries and non-negotiables prior to a conflict.

Participants also shared information about their standpoint in nonverbal ways. Although Claire felt she was performing her job well, lengthy self-evaluations required by management suggested that she would ideally do more: "It was like, oh, you can only be outstanding by going way, way above and beyond your job duties, which doesn't really make a lot of sense to me." In response, she and other staff refused to do the evaluation. Noting the "assumptions or looks that I get in this profession" as a gay man working in a library, Robert changed his physical appearance to express his pride: "I wear on my lanyard little magical homosexual pins and other things that kind of signal some more overt magical homosexuality. . . So much paraphernalia that basically says, 'I am here to support any of the gay people.'" These examples suggest that internal identity information that directly counters managerial authority or is stigmatized can be more difficult for staff to prioritize through language.

*Outcome*. Participants described mixed outcomes from a dominating style. Pushing back against a patron's behavior made Lilly feel proud: "I was very proud of myself because I said, 'Mr. X, that's not appropriate.'" Elizabeth felt that efforts to stand up for her department were successful: "I suppose that was a positive outcome because we got [management] to back off a little bit." However, other actors could double down on their standpoint in response to a participant's use of dominating styles—leading to added frustration. When Tessa informed patrons that she was closing the library when an incoming storm threatened staff safety, she had to contend with a stream of frustrated patrons: "Every time we told a new person that walked through the door, they got instantly irate or very snappish." Dominating styles could also be ignored, as Elena noted: "We're not usually successful asking people not to speak during programs."

**Obliging**

*Conflict and Style.* In an obliging style, participants constructed a working self-concept based primarily on others' standpoints, at the expense of their own. This involved an internalization of others' standpoints, blurring the distinction between external and internal identity information. Brianna's treatment as a Black woman in a paraprofessional role, including lower pay, suggested that she was not as valuable as professional staff. She internalized this information, blaming herself for her status: "I'm frustrated with myself because, you know, I could have gone back to school and gotten a degree . . . So, I can't be mad at anybody else but myself because I did not go back to school." In this way, obliging does not merely prioritize the standpoint of others but also begins to shift a participant's own standpoint in ways that mirror the standpoint of others.

This internalization could involve an effortful and deliberate suppression of internal information. As a queer person, Destiny pushed down their feelings of disgust when a patron requested

information about an anti-gay men's group: "This one felt gross . . . I would love it if someone asked me about [this group] and how they could join it, and I was able to say, 'I'm not interested in helping you with that.' But that kind of also goes against being a librarian." Robert suppressed any expression of his gay identity around certain patrons: "I feel myself putting more of a mask on and trying not to help or be as enthusiastic. . . I have to kind of diminish myself to do a lot of work with families." Participants suppressed information from their own bodies. Emma forced herself to continue meeting others' expectations for a "cartoony personality" as the children's librarian, despite internal information regarding her chronic pain: "I call it putting on my second face—when I have to be really peppy and people-oriented. . . I had to keep my face from twisting in pain, even though it felt like I was actively getting stabbed in the lower abdomen." When management denied Amber's accommodation requests, she tried to suppress the signals of her autism: "So, I had to bypass using my noise protection this afternoon to pull midday holds . . . and every time I'm pulling fiction holds, it's always this claustrophobic feeling." So, while it may be tempting to view obliging styles as a lack of effort—i.e., a participant letting other people think *for* them—these examples reveal that obliging is an effortful activity that requires a tremendous amount of resolve, often more than is required for dominating styles.

*Outcome.* While obliging enabled participants to maintain their professional personas around things like hard work and customer service, this often came at the expense of other components of their self-concept. When Ashley obliged management's request to do a pride display, she worried that it would disclose her queer identity to her family and threaten her job: "So, I said yes, but I felt anxious about doing it and I wondered if it would impact my career at the library." Robert's masking of his identity led to feelings of depression: "I get depressed <laugh>. It's not a good feeling." Caroline chose an obliging style out of a sense that other efforts would fail, which increased her feelings of futility: "I am 100% confident that if I brought this up, it would not change anything. It's very frustrating to be asked to do something and have absolutely no say in the decisions that are being made." Doing a program out of a sense of obligation and futility when management added last-minute changes negated Ella's motivation and energy: "I don't wanna do it at all. I think the real problem's gonna be when the event actually happens. I am not gonna be enthusiastic to do it."

## Integrating

*Conflict and Style.* In an integrating style, participants tried to merge internal and external identity information. They did this by engaging in collaborative information-seeking to identify new domains where no conflict existed, using this collaboratively discovered domain to construct their working self-concept. When a patron's intimate questions conflicted with Ashley's desire for personal boundaries, she tried to work with the patron to find another way to provide customer service: "I've told him before multiple times, like, 'Oh, I'm sorry I don't answer personal questions at work, but I am happy to help you with your library business.'" A patron's standpoint that Parker's book recommendation was inappropriately political conflicted with Parker's own standpoint: "I was giving the patron what they requested and wasn't really expecting her to get quite so huffy over a relatively innocuous suggestion." He quickly shifted to finding the patron another recommendation. In each of these cases, the participant attempted to extract more information about another person's standpoint in a way akin to a reference interview—showing how staff utilize traditional library skills in unique ways.

Participants also tried to revise other people's standpoints to reduce the conflict. This required more time and effort than a dominating approach, which was more concerned with quickly asserting the self-standpoint. As a result of her autism, Joanna needed the workspace to be organized in a certain way: "I have a processing disorder, so when people put things back in the wrong space or they tell me that they do something and it's not done, it kind of throws my whole day off." Whereas a dominating approach might involve a unilateral implementation of new work processes, Joanna instead tried to work *with* her colleagues to revise existing processes and explain the rationale behind those revisions: "I'm not working harder because I'm trying to show off. It's literally just what I need to do to function—there is no other way for me to take in this information."

*Outcome:* Participants had mixed assessments of the outcomes associated with integrating. Parker associated it with success: "[The patron] did seem to be responding well to, you know, me just being personable and service-oriented." Yet, because integrating required a willing collaborator, it was not always successful. While Ava's efforts got the patron to apologize for his inappropriate behavior and leave, he simply came back the next day with a pseudo apology: "And so I—thinking it was a genuine apology—said that's okay. And then he said, 'I would've asked you out, but you probably are married or something.' And again, this made me very uncomfortable." Joanna similarly struggled to explain why she needed the workplace organized differently: "It almost feels like at this point there's nothing I can do that doesn't feel like overstepping or trying to take someone's job . . . Children do not have a problem understanding what I'm saying, but when it comes to communicating with adults, it's just so difficult and I don't understand why."

**Compromising**

*Conflict and Style.* Like collaboration, compromise represents an effort to merge the self standpoint with others' standpoints. However, whereas collaboration tries to fully align the self standpoint with another's standpoint, compromise adopts a *cut-and-paste* approach. That is, the working self-concept is a partial rejection and acceptance of both internal and external information. This was often done to continue meeting a generalized standard for customer service. While Robert did not remove LGBTQIA+ materials when a patron asked, he also restricted his response in a way that felt inauthentic: "I really wanted to let her know like, 'Hey, I wish I had had these books on display when I was a kid because it would've made me feel a lot more comfortable in my skin' . . . but I didn't." Zoey refused to let a patron bypass library policy, but she also spent what she felt was an excessive amount of time explaining the policy: "It definitely made me really frustrated and kind of soured my whole morning, just simply because that was 40 minutes of my time that I had to spend on basically explaining to her that no, this was not going to happen." These instances were similar to collaborative styles in their quest for mutual acceptable solutions, but participants were aiming for quicker resolution.

Participants also compromised with management. When management's denial of Amber's request for accommodations suggested that she did not actually need them, she constructed a role identity that did not fully align with either her standpoint or that of management: "I have started working earlier so that I can get the prerequisites that are necessary for my job done while being

able to use the accommodations that I want but haven't been approved . . . It's kind of skirting the rules, but I am not going to feel comfortable out on the floor for shelf reading or shelving books unless there happens to be a way I can wear my headphones." However, she did not decide to adopt this style until after collaborative approaches to identify workable accommodations failed. Thus, compromise was not always a participant's first choice.

*Outcome.* Participants described mixed outcomes associated with compromising styles. Robert described his non-confrontational approach with a patron as uncomfortable: "I don't know, it feels weird to not be as confrontational. I did not feel successful, because I did not tell [the patron] what I thought." Yet, he also noted that compromise helped him avoid a dominating style, which can be exhausting: "But I also know that I wore myself out just trying to deal with that one interaction and was glad that there were better things and more exciting things throughout the day." While Amber noted that she was able to get her work done with limited approved accommodations, the constant compromise *increased* her exhaustion: "Again with ADA accommodations. I'm getting real sick and tired of this, I really am."

**Avoiding**

*Conflict and Style.* In an avoiding approach, participants attempted to sidestep external information about the standpoint of others. Ashley tried to physically avoid exposure to conflicting information about personal boundaries from a problematic patron: "I noticed a patron waiting at the desk. I recognized this patron and I'm not proud to admit it, but I hung back for a minute because I could see that my manager was about to go out to the desk." Like some of the compromising approaches, however, this was only after dominating approaches to asserting boundaries with the patron failed. When they could not physically avoid conflicting information, participants engaged in other active strategies after exposure to the information. Jessica deployed a strategy of inattention in response to a patron's negative reaction to her physical appearance: "It made me feel a little uncomfortable and taken aback in the moment . . . But I kind of brushed it off and helped him." When Emma ran out of summer reading rewards, she tried to comfort herself to forget a child's negative reaction: "Trying to get myself to say it's okay. Not saying that the child will get over it, but to tell myself that I did the best that I can." When a patron's anger with Ashley for not allowing them to remain in the children's section conflicted with Ashley's standpoint that she was obligated to follow policy and procedure, she reinterpreted the information as being about something other than her self-concept: "I don't think it had anything to do with me. I think she was already upset with [another person] and that's why she snipped at me."

In their efforts to avoid conflicting external information, participants also sought out additional information that confirmed their self-standpoint. When Destiny informed a patron of library policy for checking out technology, the patron ignored her and asked the same question to a White staff member. In her efforts to not attend to this information, Destiny looked for validation of her competence: "In this case, I didn't do anything, except listen to my partner give the explanation and see that it was the exact same thing I had said." When she heard colleagues complaining about her performance on a routine, Caroline sought out other colleagues who confirmed her self-standpoint that she was following library policy: "In terms of resolving it, I

spoke to that member of staff who I knew would feel similarly, and we both, you know, kind of rolled our eyes."

*Outcome.* Participants often associated avoiding styles with positive outcomes. Leaving a situation enabled Elena to refocus: "I think the change of scenery gave me a refreshing, even to the point where I just sat there for about 10 minutes and kind of like coach myself saying, Hey, you can do it." Brianna's efforts to forget about her pay and treatment as a paraprofessional changed her perception of herself: "But I've stopped beating myself up with that because I can't help it how much they pay me." Avoiding also increased safety by removing participants from potentially dangerous situations. Yet, avoiding was not always sustainable. Although initially brushing off a patron's comments about her appearance, Jessica struggled to sustain the inattention and forgetting: "After it kind of hit emotionally, and I got pretty upset. So, I did cry a little bit in the back room."

**Table 1**: Description and outcome of participant approaches to managing conflicting information about the self-concept

## DISCUSSION

This study confirmed that information is central to a library staff member's identity construction, providing participants with the "discursive building materials for weaving [their] narrated imaginary" (Costas and Fleming, 2009). This includes internal information suggesting a staff member's own standpoint on their identity, as well as external information suggesting the standpoint of patrons, colleagues, and management. Participants sourced internal information from the memories and experiences of their pre-existing identities, i.e., who they are outside of work (Pierson, 2024). They sourced external information primarily through interactions, including the verbal and nonverbal communication and behaviors of patrons, colleagues, and management. Yet, they also noted a general sense of another person's standpoint, much of which came as they experienced routine work. This suggests that much of the sensegiving provided by the profession comes, not through formal avenues or codified materials, but through the practice of librarianship, i.e., the embodied *sayings*, *doings*, and *relatings* that shape the library workplace (Lloyd and Olsson, 2019).

This study also showed that existing conflict management models can help explain how library staff manage conflicts in identity relevant information. Participants adopted a dynamic and fluid approach to managing these conflicts, sometimes using multiple approaches with the same conflict. This is consistent with research suggesting that conflict management styles are open to adjustment, in contrast to personality traits or dispositions that tend to be more fixed (Ogilvie and Kidder, 2008). Also consistent with research, no style was inherently better or worse than another (Rahim, 1983). Rather, they were more or less appropriate in certain situations. Whereas Rahim (2002) defined appropriateness as the extent to which a style "leads to effective formulation and/or solution to a problem" (p. 218), the current study defines appropriateness by its impact on staff well-being. Consistent with Chung-Yan and Moeller's (2010) research into the psychosocial costs of conflict styles, this means that staff may choose a style that is less effective at solving a problem because it is less psychosocially taxing. The following considers the appropriateness of styles based on the current study's findings.

**Conflict Styles and Outcomes**

*Dominating.* Rahim (2002) suggested that dominating is appropriate in situations when management needs to implement an unpopular course of action, deal with assertive others, or when an issue is particularly important to someone. Participants had similar motivations for using this style to construct their working self-concept, as their standpoint on following policies was unpopular, they found it necessary to reassert boundaries with assertive patrons, and the belief that they belonged and were competent was important to them. Used successfully, a dominating style can increase a staff member's sense of authenticity—"the loyalty of one's self to its own past, heritage, and ethos (Heidegger, 1962, p. 117). Authenticity is a recognition that a person's *front-stage* presentation is aligned with their *back-stage* identity (Costas and Fleming, 2009). It can decrease the alienation that comes when staff are not allowed to be their *whole authentic self* (Almeida, 2021). This was noted by participants' feelings of pride and success. A dominating approach can also break through the silencing of counterstories and the relative loudness of normative stories (Irvin et al., 2024). However, dominating styles have also been linked to higher rates of emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Beitler *et al*., 2016). Constant efforts to compete for one's self-standpoint increases emotional labor and can be emotionally draining (Shearer and Chiewphasa, 2021). This was noted when other actors doubled down and increased their frustration in response to a participant's use of dominating styles.

*Obliging*. Rahim (2002) suggested that obliging is appropriate in situations when a person believes they are wrong, that preserving relationships is more important, or when an issue is deemed more important to the other party. Participants in this study had different motivations for using this approach, however, including shame, futility, and guilt. This led them to construct a self-concept that questioned their own competence, exceeded their body's limitations, and accepted that they did not belong. Rejecting the self-standpoint in favor of other's standpoints can potentially deprive staff of the benefits of expressing stigmatized identities, including decreased stress and anxiety, increased job satisfaction, and career advancement (Sabat *et al*., 2020). Obliging in this study increased a participant's anxiety, sapped them of energy, and led to feelings of depression. Continued and routinized use of this style can also lead to an arrested identity in which staff are "drained from drives to mobilize alternative selves and thus engage in resistance" (Costas and Kärreman, 2016). Yet, obliging may be useful regarding non-core components of the self-concept, as it allows one to avoid confrontation and negotiation with others which can be emotionally draining and potentially risky. It can also enable staff to align themselves with external identity information in ways that are career-enhancing.

*Integrating*. Rahim (2002) suggested that integrating can be appropriate—as time allows—in situations when one person cannot solve a problem alone. The defining feature of an integrating approach in the current study was that participants recognized that they did not have enough information to construct their working self-concept. Instead, they relied on collaborative sensemaking—a type of collaborative information behavior that occurs as "multiple actors, with different perspectives about a situation, engage in the process of making sense of 'messy' information" (Karunakaran *et al*., 2013). They worked with patrons to reformulate identity problems and identify new domains where conflicts did not exist. They shared new information with colleagues, asking them to incorporate that information into a reevaluation of their standpoints. While integrating approaches are associated with successful problem-solving

(Rahim, 2002), Shaw (2013) suggested that collaboration may have limited effectiveness when it's forced, or limited advantages when costs and benefits are unevenly distributed. Increased use of integration has also been linked with increased rates of negative psychosocial consequences, including anxiety and depression (Chung-Yan and Moeller, 2010). This was noted when participants struggled to find a willing collaborator, instead facing additional frustrations in their attempts to integrate identity information.

*Compromise*. Rahim (2002) suggested that compromise can be appropriate as a last resort. When other styles have failed and the parties have reached an impasse, compromise can lead to a temporary solution that avoids continued conflict. While there was evidence that participants compromised out of necessity—e.g., a temporary solution when accommodation requests are denied—findings suggest that compromise was often a first resort. Participants' decision to restrain themselves when dealing with patrons, compromising on their reactions, is likely the result of their awareness of the emotional display rules for librarianship (Matteson and Miller, 2013). Awareness of demands to suppress negative emotions—like disappointment at a patron's request to remove LGBTQIA+ materials—and resulting surface acting required to fake those emotions is associated with increased emotional exhaustion and cynicism and reduced job satisfaction (Matteson and Miller, 2013). While research has suggested that compromise is an effective strategy—particularly for de-escalating conflicts with customers in service professions (Beitler *et al*., 2016)—it has also been linked with negative impacts on worker well-being (Lin *et al*., 2014). This is supported in the current study, because while compromise enabled participants to avoid the exhaustion associated with dominating strategies and get their work done, it also led to feelings of inauthenticity and frustration.

*Avoiding*. Rahim (2002) suggested that avoiding represents a low concern for self and others and is appropriate when dealing with trivial issues where the costs of confrontation are too great. Participants in this study, however, used avoidance to prioritize internal information about the core, non-trivial elements of the self standpoint. Rather than reveal a low concern for self, participants used avoidance because they had a strong sense of personal boundaries, felt confident in what they needed to do in order to be successful, and took pride in their appearance, decisions, and performances. While individualist cultures tend to downplay the role of avoidance in favor of more confrontational approaches to conflict (Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994), staff in this study used avoidance effectively to remove themselves from situations that threatened their physical or emotional well-being. This is consistent with Pitcan *et al*.'s (2018) finding that Black workers often feel it necessary to pick their battles as a means of conserving emotional energy and maintaining employment and Irvin et al.'s (2024) suggestion that silence is often used as a coping mechanism for navigating whiteness in the workplace. Avoiding allowed participants to protect core components of their self-concept from external threats without the emotional work involved in other styles. The inability to sustain these efforts at times, however, suggests that libraries should proactively support staff efforts to avoid problematic situations.

**Implications for EDI**
By situating the research within routine library work, the current study also has implications for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in libraries aimed at improving the workspace for people with identities that are underrepresented in the profession. This is because, while routines are often considered to be static and unchanging, a practice approach to routine work

suggests that routines can be a source of profound and lasting change (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). This occurs as the performance of a routine shifts its ostensive elements—in this case, external information about who a staff member ideally is or should be. This study found several problematic identity assumptions encoded into routine library work for staff whose identities do not fit neatly within the normalizing standards of the profession. Gay staff were expected to be opposed to gay materials in the library, Black staff were assumed to be less knowledgeable and internalized low pay as a sign of personal failure, staff with autism were asked to work as if they did not have autism, staff with chronic pain were asked to work as if the pain did not bother them. It is incumbent on libraries to recognize these examples as problematic and work to revise the blueprints of routine library work in ways that overcome these problems. Yet, it is also important for libraries to recognize that these are not new issues. Cooke and Kitzie (2021) noted the tendency in the profession to see these issues and proposed solutions as new and *paradigm-shifting*, even though they have been there all along.

Because many of the identity assumptions in routine work center around stigmatized identities, one way to conceptualize blueprint revisions is through the lens of disclosure, i.e., making space for internal identity information. Routines that ask staff to mask their queer identity or chronic pain, for instance, can be revised through the inclusion of contextual supports that increase the likelihood of disclosure of these identities by reducing the risks associated with that disclosure (Webster et al., 2018). The disclosure of stigmatized identities has been linked to positive health outcomes, increased job satisfaction, social support, and reduced tension (Follmer et al., 2019). While libraries work to revise these routines, the current study's findings can also inform the efforts of underrepresented or marginalized staff to identify effective strategies for working in a profession centered around whiteness (Hathcock, 2015). Familiarity with the various conflict management strategies can support the strategic efforts of these staff to carve out spaces for themselves within the profession.

**Limitations**

The distinction made in this study between internal and external information is somewhat artificial. This is because a person's internal monologue is still influenced by other people (Waterman, 2014), and a person's construction of their "workable fantasy of a unique and coherent self" is not merely a personal invention (Costas and Fleming, 2009). This blurring of internal and external information about the self-concept is most notable when people internalize stereotypes (Cravey, 1991). In the case of people of color internalizing racism (David *et al.*, 2019), for instance, internal information about their self-standpoint is a reflection of external information about others' standpoints. The current study was only interested, however, in how a participant's current construction of their identity was influenced by internal and external information—regardless of how that information originated. It is also important to note that the ROCI-II was developed using undergraduate and MBA students and managers, and it was validated using a national sample of 1,219 executives that included only 50 females (Rahim, 1983). Thus, it is possible that some of the conflict management styles used by participants— who included primarily women and underrepresented staff not in positions of authority—are not fully accounted for by the model. The emergent coding approach used, however, was able to identify subtle ways in which participant styles differed from those identified in earlier research.

**CONCLUSION**

Information science has long recognized the importance of moving beyond traditional sources of information to consider the myriad ways in which people interact with and do things with information. The workplace introduces its own sources and complexities, much of which center around who a worker is, who they ideally would be, and who they should be. Workers must navigate several sources of identity-relevant information, including their own, and devise strategies for dealing with conflicting information. However, because less is known about the identities of library staff—particularly staff with identities that are underrepresented in the profession—they are often forced to do this information work alone and many are not equipped to do it successfully. In this study, 21 staff members at public libraries in the SE United States completed audio diaries and interviews that revealed conflicts in identity-relevant information, how they managed these conflicts, and the outcomes of different styles. By increasing understanding of identity-relevant information and how staff navigate it, the current study supports the profession's efforts to a) recognize problematic identity information, b) revise routines in which this information is present, and c) train staff on the use of different strategies and inform them of the potential outcomes of each strategy.

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