Be Who We All Want You to Be: Navigating Identity Regulation in the Public Library

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries are rapidly changing in response to societal and technological shifts, and with these shifts comes serious demands on the identities of library staff. This represents a type of identity regulation, a form of socio-ideological control employed by organizational actors to define worker identities. While this manufactured subjectivity can be unproblematic, it can also lead to alienation, exhaustion, and a loss of authenticity—particularly for workers with non-normative identities. In this study, 21 public library staff members recorded audio diaries and sat for an interview about their experiences in routine library work. Findings reveal the presence of several identity suggestions centered around things like productivity, continuous improvement, customer service, and organizational citizenship. Participants responded to these regulation attempts in several ways, including identification with the suggested identity, dis-identification, and ambivalence. Findings suggest the need for proactive support structures that enable staff to align their work identities with their authentic selves.

KEYWORDS

Routine dynamics, marginalization, underrepresentation, stigmatization, identity work, library workers

INTRODUCTION

The people who work in public libraries are asked to wear several different *hats*. They are ad-hoc social workers helping people navigate things like health, education, employment, and housing (Cabello and Butler, 2017). They are companions for older adults, babysitters for busy parents, language instructors for immigrants, and they cultivate welcoming spaces for the unsheltered (Klinenberg, 2018). During the pandemic, they connected communities to broadband, provided kids with books, and worked on the front lines of the vaccine rollout (ALA, 2022). They have been enlisted to fight the nation's opioid epidemic (Correal, 2018) and the mis and disinformation that characterizes what the World Health Organization has called an *infodemic* (Wilhelm et al. 2023).

The work of library staff, then, involves a constant negotiation of the boundaries that define what the library is and is not—who they are and who they are not. And, in line with wider trends in the identity regulation of workers (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), workplace actors are more than willing to provide suggestions for what those boundaries should look like. These suggestions may center around things like hard work and teamwork (Costas and Kärreman, 2016), but they also often center around identity norms based on things like gender, race, sexual orientation, and ability (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021; Boussebaa, 2020). As a result, workers with identities that do not match these norms are often subjected to additional pressures to regulate who they are and contort themselves into alignment with normative identities.

Not only are library staff not immune to these identity regulation pressures, but they might be more susceptible to them because of the position of libraries as *boundary objects* (Williams and Willet, 2019). The meaning of boundary objects, like libraries, is defined through a meeting of several different perspectives and needs coming from a diverse set of actors. This means that there are more actors providing staff with identity suggestions—often informed by the profession's *whiteness* (Hathcock, 2015; Hathcock and Sendaula, 2017). Library staff are also subject to *vocational awe*, defined as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique" (Ettarh, 2018, para. 3). This awe helps to justify an actor's regulation of library staff identity, while also putting staff into a position where they feel that they must accept that regulation because their own answers to the identity questions are insignificant and secondary.

Through an investigation of the routine work of public libraries, the current study aims to uncover the presence and nature of identity regulation, as well as how staff respond to it. This article begins with an overview of identity regulation, including its theoretical foundations and what it looks like both inside and outside of librarianship. Particular attention is paid to the regulation of non-normative identities. After outlining the study's design, the article then presents findings that reveal the nature and implications of identity regulation in the public library and how staff respond. Finally, the article discusses these findings in light of existing research and considers its practical implications for the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Manufacturing Identity

Most organizations engage in some efforts to modify worker behavior in ways that support the organization's vision of success. Achieving these modifications requires some form of management control, which can be employed through a variety of tools that seek to control the behavior, output, or minds of workers (Costas and Kärreman, 2013). The Industrial Revolution cemented the goals of this modification—centered around things like hard work, productivity, and continuous improvement—as well as the strategies used to achieve it. Frederick Taylor employed rigid standardization and surveillance to induce a "complete mental revolution on the part of the workingman . . . as to their duties toward their work, toward their fellow men, and toward their employers" (Taylor, 1912, 103). Yet, modern organizations have discovered that more subtle approaches can be highly effective. One such approach is identity regulation, which is a form of socio-ideological control employed by organizations to define worker identities using symbols, e.g., slogans, value statements (Costas and Kärreman, 2016). According to Identity Control Theory (ICT), a worker's self-identity is influenced by standards that define what it means to be a member of a social group, someone occupying a specific role, or a unique individual (Stets and Burke, 2005). Ideal standards are rooted in the self and the meanings a worker strives to maintain, while ought standards are rooted in others and the meanings a worker feels they should maintain (Higgins, 1987). In identity regulation, organizations attempt to provide workers, who are searching

for a sense of meaning, with the "cultural raw material" from which they can construct a sense of self that aligns with the organization's interests (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This might include things like vision statements, slogans, newsletters, team-building activities, etc.

Organizations then rely on *disciplinary power* (Foucault, 1977), in the form of measurement, comparison, and surveillance, to normalize these identities. The goal is manufactured subjectivity—a worker's self-positioning within meanings associated with things like hard work, teamwork, and mission-orientation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas and Kärreman, 2016). Examples include an organization's emphasis on corporate social responsibility to manufacture an aspirational image of themselves as a good company, to which workers then attach their sense of self (Costas and Kärreman, 2013). Organizations might also work to manufacture identities centered around compulsory citizenship behaviors (CCBs) that normalize and mandate going *above and beyond* (Bolino et al., 2013).

Regulation attempts can also target a worker's expression of emotion. Hochschild (1983) noted that humans, guided by social norms, have always found it necessary to regulate both public displays of emotion and private feelings. However, the shift in workplaces from working with things to working with people has turned emotion into an instrument of labor, asking workers to suppress their personal feelings to increase customer satisfaction. The emotional labor workers conduct can influence their private or even unconscious feelings. For instance, the suggestion that flight attendants *really smile* can have the effect of

“[estranging them] from their own smiles” (5). According to self-determination theory, this continued obstruction of a worker’s attempts at self-regulation can result in decreased satisfaction and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

Because it is informed by organizational norms, identity regulation often targets identities perceived as existing outside of these norms due to things like race, ethnicity, culture, disability, sexual orientation, and gender. For instance, Gago-Rodríguez, Lazcano, and Bada (2024) found that the discourses used in the regulation of worker identities in Spain made Latina accountants feel inferior because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and migrant status. Bousebba and Brown (2017) found that a French university used notions of international competitiveness to discipline non-Anglophone scholars to align themselves with Anglophone identities. Jammaers and Zanoni (2021) found that a bank regulated the identities of disabled workers by subsuming their disability within the discourse of competence, skill, ambition, and hard work—requiring these workers to “live up to a norm that was not written on a disabled body” (p. 440). They also found that found that, because a job placement organization could not get rid of disabled workers, it regulated their identities as inadequate and incompetent to sustain its definitions of the ideal worker (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2021). Multinational enterprises regulate the identities of workers toward Western ways of being and doing, treating workers as inferior to their Western counterparts (Boussebaa, 2020). Even work uniforms have been shown to regulate the identities of workers by reminding them that slim bodies are ideal (Vonk, 2024).

So, while the identity suggestions for workers center around the *ideal* worker, they also mark non-normative identities as inferior.

Identity Regulation in Libraries

Because professional identity in librarianship is fluid, changing in response to ongoing experiences and expectations (Fraser-Arnott, 2022), staff regularly confront suggestions that they should modify their sense of self. These suggestions are sourced from a dominant vision of what a library is and what it means to work in one—a vision that is often created without the input of staff and suggested to staff through subtle messages. The broader context within which identity suggestions are provided to staff, as articulated in ALA's (2024) *Core Values of Librarianship*, depicts a wide-ranging and awe-inspiring (Ettarh, 2018) role for library staff in maintaining the social and civic fabric of the country. The breadth and scope of this suggested role distinguishes the identity regulation of library staff from workers in other customer-facing occupations, e.g., hospitality, retail. While a hotel worker may feel a sense of responsibility to make guests feel comfortable and answer their questions, the responsibility library staff take on for social crises like housing, health, and employment (Cabello and Butler, 2017) uniquely justifies and strengthens identity regulation.

In addition, library staff are often asked to adopt these identities without sufficient support. Libraries encourage staff to do *more with less* (Kendrick, 2021, 28), asking them to "pick up the slack" in America's social safety net without the resources necessary to do so (ULU, 2022). For libraries to meet the demand for increasing resources and services—without accompanying increases in budgets or

staffing—staff are asked to multitask and handle multiple interruptions when staffing public service desks (Jordan, 2014). In the face of these increasing identity demands and lack of support, staff are encouraged to regulate their displays of emotion, e.g., be *library nice* (Song, 2022). During instruction, staff are required to display enthusiasm while hiding their feelings of boredom and frustration (Julien and Genuis, 2009). Professional guidelines asking staff to be approachable and to show interest are filled with emotional directives and display rules (Matteson and Miller, 2013) that go beyond prescriptions for behavior, suggesting to workers who and how they should be (Emmelhainz, Pappas, & Seale, 2017).

Consistent with the regulation occurring in other professions, research suggests that the regulation of library staff identities also targets non-normative identities. Hathcock (2015) called out the insidious and invisible work of whiteness within the profession. Vinopal (2016) lamented the continued lack of staffing diversity despite a growing awareness of the need for diversity based on things like race and ethnicity, age, disability, and other identity markers. Mehra and Gray (2020) provided a detailed overview of “White-IST” practices in LIS that seek to maintain the status quo—combining the terms “White” and “Elitist.”

This means that identity regulation is likely to be more pronounced for staff who are not naturally aligned with these suggestions, e.g., staff of color (Ossom-Williamson et al. 2021), staff with disabilities (Cook and Clement, 2019), and staff with mental health challenges (Burns and Green, 2019). The very initiatives that seek to advance the professional development of underrepresented

library workers also suggests that, in order to advance in the profession, these workers need to suppress their authentic selves (Mehra & Gray, 2020). Particularly in librarianship, a profession mostly consisting of women, identity regulation also latches onto longstanding assumptions and demands of women in the workplace. The requirements for library workers to provide complete attention to patron needs, perform interest in patron concerns, and bear responsibility for patron emotions turns the women who work in libraries into objects of visibility for the consumption of others (Emmelhainz, Pappas, and Seale, 2017).

Informed by existing literature in identity regulation, the current study asked: What identity suggestions are provided to public library staff, and what are the implications of these suggestions (**RQ1**)?

Routine Work and Worker Responses to Identity Regulation

The current study situates identity regulation within the context of routine work in public libraries—a particular type of workplace practice that is often repeated and tends to follow a similar sequence (Feldman et al. 2021). A typical public library might have routines for tasks like opening and closing, maintaining the physical collection, purchasing, and reference support. Rooted in practice theories, the study of Routine Dynamics considers the two mutually reinforcing elements of this work—its ostensive and performative elements. The ostensive element, which includes the blueprints for how the work should be completed, represents a potentially powerful tool for identity regulation. This is because it can encode suggestions for worker identity, subjecting this identity to the *patterning* (D'Adderio, 2014) inherent to routine work. In this way, "routines do

not just produce goods and services; they (re)produce the social order in which those goods and services have value" (Feldman and Pentland, 2022, 849). An important contribution of Routine Dynamics, however, is the suggestion that workers can introduce variations to routine blueprints through their performance of the routine (Feldman et al. 2021). Through the performative element of routine work, workers can potentially rewrite the ostensive blueprints.

Routine Dynamics is a useful framework for the current study's consideration of identity regulation in public libraries for two reasons. First, it provides a framework for understanding how staff respond to identity regulation through their performance of library work. Given the assumptions of ICT, staff compare the identities that are suggested to them through routine blueprints with the self-identities they perceive in a given routine performance (Stets and Burke, 2005). Discrepancies between the identity expectations of others and who routine performance suggests they are triggers "an error signal" that staff are motivated to reduce (Stets and Burke, 2005, 3). In response to these discrepancies, staff might attempt to align their performance of a routine with the routine blueprints—attempting to be who the routine suggests they are or should be. For instance, staff might take additional customer service training courses to improve their alignment with blueprints for routine patron interactions. This increased identification with the library can be associated with an increased sense of meaning and belonging (Ashforth, 2001). Yet, staff may also overidentify in ways that cause them to lose their individual sense of identity (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Staff might choose, instead, to distance themselves from the identities

suggested in routine blueprints, using tools like cynicism, humor, and skepticism that help them maintain some alternative identity (Costas and Fleming, 2009). Typically, efforts to attach oneself to a suggested identity—or at least *pass* as such—are rewarded, while attempts to disclose alternative identities are punished (Reid, 2015). Staff may also express ambivalence about some identity suggestions—feeling "pulled toward identification on some dimensions, but pulled toward dis-identification on an important other dimension" (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004, 4). Finally, staff might struggle to find an alternative identity that works for them, which can lead to self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009).

Second, Routine Dynamics helps frame the subtle nature of identity regulation. Because routine blueprints ostensibly center around *how* a worker completes a task, rather than *who* they are while they do it, staff may fail to recognize the identity suggestions embedded within them—making it more likely that they will adopt these suggestions as their own. Diamond and Lewis (2019), for instance, explored the ability of school disciplinary routines to hide their assumptions about Black students. Although the performance of these routines proved that they were centered around discriminatory assumptions about racial identity, administrators hid behind ostensive blueprints that said nothing explicitly about race. As routine work is repeated, these problematic assumptions can easily become normalized and standardized in ways that limit critique.

Informed by this research on routine patterning and performance, the current study asked: How do staff respond to identity regulation attempts (**RQ2**)?

METHODS

The application of Routine Dynamics in the current study suggests that library staff are intentional in their responses to identity regulation, constructing their responses *in situ* (Lopez-Cotarelo, 2021). Because diary methods elicit data about events close to the time those events occur, they are more likely to capture elements of these situations that more retrospective tools, like surveys and interviews, cannot account for (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli, 2003). Diary methods also remove the presence of the researcher during data collection, which is particularly important in the current study given that the researchers represent several normative identities, while participants represent several non-normative identities. Audio diary methods have the added benefit over traditional diary methods of capturing subtle shifts in tone, lowering the burden on participants, and capturing more of a participant's sense-making process (Monrouxe, 2009).

Sample and Recruitment

After receiving IRB approval, staff from public libraries in the Southeastern United States were recruited to participate. The researchers sent emails to library management, asking them to post a flyer about the study. Participation was open to anyone who worked in a public library and identified with a group that is not well-represented in the profession or is, in some way, marginalized or stigmatized. This included BIPOC staff, LGBTQIA+ staff, staff with disabilities or chronic conditions, and staff with mental illnesses (Fig. 1). To reduce any potential impacts on participation, management was not involved at any other point in the study, and participants were informed that their participation was confidential and management would not know who participated.

Staff who were interested first met with the research team, who clarified the study, answered questions, and obtained consent. Recruitment continued until the researchers felt that the coding categories were robust and answered the research questions and that "no new properties of the pattern emerge[d]" (Glaser, 2001, p. 191). This pragmatic definition of theoretical saturation goes beyond overly simplistic measures like the number of participants (Low, 2019). In total, 21 staff members, representing 18 public libraries, participated in the research.

Figure 1. Study Sample Demographics. Note: One participant did not complete the demographics survey.

Process and Analysis

Participants noted times throughout their workday when they were engaged in routine work that made them feel stuck, frustrated, or uncomfortable. Participants then recorded a 6-8 minute audio diary, following a series of prompts provided by the researchers, as soon after those events as possible. Due to scheduling, this was often at the end of the day. Participants recorded diaries using the native audio recording app on their cell phones and uploaded recordings to a secure cloud folder. Each participant was asked to record one diary each for five nonconsecutive days, recording only when they felt they had something to talk about. Prompts asked participants to recall specific and minor details about their work, including the obstacles they faced, how they responded to those obstacles, and their perception of the outcome. 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. Pseudonyms were used, and specific identifiable information was removed from the findings. Participants then engaged in a 45-minute semi-structured interview where they were asked to directly consider the role of their identity in the routine work they discussed in the diaries. These interviews also clarified what was said in the diaries and provided insight on the audio diary method itself (Williamson, Leeming, and Lyttle, 2015).

Transcripts were analyzed using template analysis, which involves the creation of a list of hierarchically ordered codes that account for themes emerging from a detailed reading of transcripts (King, 2012). Template analysis is a form of thematic analysis commonly used in organizational research, and in diary research in particular (Pilbeam et al. 2016). The initial template was developed from existing research but was revised after initial application to the transcripts. After collaboratively constructing the initial template, the rest of the coding was split between the researchers, who met regularly to discuss progress and discrepancies. Coding categories in the final template included routine characteristics, identity standards and sources, discrepancies, workarounds, and outcomes.

FINDINGS

Identity Suggestions and Implications

Management suggestions. The identities provided by management centered around followership, productivity, and continuous improvement. Followership is considered a central and co-constructive component of leadership, marked by deference, obedience, and a relinquishing of autonomy (Uhl-Bien et al.

2014). The conservative board at Rachel's library implemented several new guidelines for book displays during Pride Month:

> "They are making me change the title of the display from *Rainbow Reads* to *LGBTQ+ Voices*, because they felt that *Rainbow Reads* was too celebratory for Pride . . . I wanted to incorporate rainbows somewhere, but was told no; it had to be all one color text in this specific font."

This identity suggestion was reinforced with disciplinary power: "I like this job. I don't want to get fired. I feel like I can't be seen to be rocking the boat."

Productivity suggestions were often combined with suggestions around continuous improvement, resulting in a sense that anything a participant did was never quite enough. Management in Ashley's library implemented a self-rating system that encoded an expectation to always exceed stated goals:

> "When this system was first made, it was, like, 'Oh, you can only be outstanding by going way, way above and beyond your job duties.' I think if you're doing your work at 100%, then that should be the top rating. You shouldn't necessarily have to go above and beyond your workload to get the top rating."

These shifting productivity goals were often coupled with vague notions of continuous improvement, which Ashley found confusing: "We're supposed to create goals, but the structure of the goals continuously changes. So, I never have a very clear understanding of what management is asking." This combination of overly prescribed guidelines—which Ossom-Williamson et al. (2021) noted is

particularly prevalent for Black library staff—with vague expectations to overperform, made staff feel like their performance was never quite enough.

Patron suggestions. Identity suggestions provided by patrons centered around customer advocacy, which meant different things to different patrons. It might mean staying open during a hurricane, as Sam recalled intense patron reactions to the library closing:

> "You would have thought that we told them that the moon and the sun switched places . . . Every time we told a new person that walked through the door, they got instantly irate or very snappish."

Dylan's attempts to teach technology skills to patrons, so they could handle computer tasks more independently in the future, were often at odds with patron expectations that staff are their personal assistants:

> "[This patron] always wants staff to do it for him. He's not interested in learning. . . I just feel like some patrons just want us to be their secretary and they just want to sit back and have work done for them."

Patron identity suggestions extended beyond the traditional customer service role, however, centering around normative definitions of who should work in a library. The nonverbal communication of patrons suggested to Jacob that, as a gay man, he did not belong in a library:

> "I got this weird feeling of, because I am male in an improperly stereotypically female position and also because I am gay, there's a lot of

assumptions or looks that I get in this profession. . . Some patrons give me an odd, wary eye."

A patron suggested to Alexis that, as a Black woman, she could not possibly provide accurate information:

"After I had given the customer the information, she looked at me and immediately sidestepped over to speak with my partner who was at the desk—who just happened to be a White male—and then asked him the exact same question."

A patron pushed back against Kayla's physical appearance: "He kept being like, 'I can't understand you because you're wearing that mask.' And then he said something along the lines of, like, 'The mask, the hair, the dress. Are you just trying to stand out?"

Colleague suggestions. Colleague identity suggestions centered around familial obligations to be helpful and supportive, as described by Megan:

"There's a lot of pressure in my workplace to think of ourselves as a family, which I definitely don't . . . I do definitely feel that pressure to be nice to everyone all the time and to offer to help and to offer my time and my assistance, even when common sense should tell me that I don't have the bandwidth to offer that time and assistance with a project."

Family membership embedded several different identity suggestions. For instance, part of being a family meant not pointing out mistakes, as noted when Michelle talked to a colleague about a misplaced hold:

> “When I've done that a couple of times with this person, the person got upset with me and I felt like they were giving me the cold shoulder.”

Family membership also meant giving up time to assist colleagues with their work, as noted by Megan:

> “I'm often seen as an authority on policies and procedures . . . I think people sometimes outsource what should be in their own brains to me . . . they use my competency as an excuse for not developing their own.”

Responses to Identity Regulation

Participants’ responses to identity regulation attempts were categorized by the direction of their response—efforts to move toward and identify with a suggestion, or efforts to move away from and dis-identify with a suggestion.

Direct dis-identification. In a direct dis-identification, participants identified and mobilized alternative standards to distance themselves from a suggested identity. When she could not provide a child with a summer reading t-shirt, Jasmine told herself that she did her best: “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.” Sydney mobilized an identity centered around excellence when her colleagues expected her to let things slide:

> “I understand being patient and kind and that everyone's like, ‘Well this isn't that big of a deal.’ But I do think that . . . the expectation to get their job done or to maintain the collection should be held to a higher standard.”

Sam mobilized an alternative identity around safety that countered patron suggestions around customer service:

> "I don't understand why some patrons don't get that we have families too, that we want to be safe . . . I love my job, but they do not pay me enough to drive in heavy rain or windy conditions where I have to put my hazards on to go over the bridge. I'm sorry, that's just a hard no for me."

This mobilization of alternative identities gave staff the confidence to directly counter suggested identities that they found problematic. In response to a male patron's expectation that she would share personal details about her life, Erin said, "Oh, I'm sorry I don't answer personal questions at work, but I am happy to help you with your library business."

Avoidance-based dis-identification. In an avoidance-based dis-identification, participants attempted to avoid routine performances that suggested problematic identities. Rachel avoided a patron whose uncomfortable questions overextended her role identity: "I recognized this patron and I'm not proud to admit it, but I hung back for a minute." Kaitlyn noted that her colleagues often stopped to talk with her because she is seen as personable and friendly. As someone with ADHD, these frequent interruptions could make it difficult to complete work, like balancing the cash drawer. In response, she isolated herself from her colleagues: "When I do this, I like to barricade myself in the administrative office just so I don't get distracted while I'm counting, because basic math is very hard for me for some reason." Suggestions from management for Kayla's performance of a book bundling routine conflicted with those of her

colleagues, who told her that this work should not be conducted in view of patrons. In response, Kayla stopped doing the work:

> “The way I handled the obstacle was to just put it away and to stop doing the task, because I wanted to confirm it to make sure that it was okay . . . So, I didn't really do anything to try to work around that obstacle. It just didn't feel great.”

Obstructed dis-identification. In an obstructed dis-identification, participants attempted to dis-identify but struggled to mobilize an alternative self. As a children’s librarian, Kaitlyn found it difficult to detach herself from expectations to always be *peppy:*

> “I wish that I could sink back into the shadows, so to speak, so that I could kind of feel my pain without having to mask my face . . . it's really mentally taxing going through searing pain and still having to maintain a normal composure during a conversation for 5, 10, 15 minutes at a time.”

These obstructions could lead to paranoia as the problematic identity suggestion continued to linger. Alyssa could not fully dis-identify with patrons’ politically motivated expectations around her design of a Pride display:

> “I saw two moms standing out talking about [the display]… [and] I noticed that I'm sitting there like clenching my teeth. I'm stressing out about two women I don't know having a conversation about a book that I didn't write. And it's just really frustrating.”

Direct identification. In a direct identification, participants adopted the suggested identity, often changing some element of their performance to increase alignment with it. Natalie adopted a helper identity with her colleagues: “I ended up having to vacuum the entire room. I cleaned scraps of paper, I had to arrange tables and chairs . . . so that was some additional work that I didn't anticipate.” Emma adopted management’s follower and productivity identities by overworking: “I spent a total of four hours on the desk with no break in between. So, I didn't even get to eat lunch until my shift was over. So, that was fun. I was hungry. I've only had water.”

Yet, direct identification could also be faked, as Megan noted with the expectations around family culture and collegiality: “I definitely say a lot of fake nice things and do a lot of fake nice things that I don't mean and that I regret later.” These efforts to *pass* as aligned with a suggested identity (Reid, 2015) often resulted in masking or hiding behaviors. After struggling to dis-identify with suggestions to be peppy, Kaitlyn ultimately hid 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 . . . all I can do to keep up appearances so that people don't worry or so that, you know, the kids don't get freaked out or anything.”

Jacob similarly masked his performance so patrons would not know he was gay:

> “I feel myself putting more of a mask on and trying not to help or be as enthusiastic . . . to be safe and careful around other people. I have to

> diminish myself to do a lot of work with families. And I get depressed. It's, like, me and my history, and I feel rotten trying to mask that."

Obstructed identification. In an obstructed identification, participants attempted to identify with a suggested identity but faced barriers that made it difficult to do so. As someone with autism, Emma tried to align herself with management's productivity-based identity. Yet, management continuously denied her accommodation requests, e.g., wearing headphones: "My struggles to get ADA accommodations have been affecting my job. It's caused me severe anxiety throughout the day, and a constant fear that I'm going to be fired throughout this process."

Though Sydney tried to align herself with patron customer service standards, management's scheduling put her in situations that made this difficult: "It's really hard to have an effective, successful program where [patrons] get everything out of it if I'm the only person there." Scheduling also made it difficult for Michelle to align with colleague helping suggestions:

> "I should not have been put in the position where I was in charge of two new people this weekend while I was doing a large-scale program. It was not fair for [my colleagues] to not have my full attention."

These unsuccessful identification efforts could lead to what Jasmine described as "feeling like a busy failure."

Ambivalence. Responses to identity regulation went beyond complete identification or dis-identification, including ambivalence toward some identity

suggestions. A male patron was angry with Alexis for not providing access to a room, but while she did not identify as someone who deserved to be yelled at, she also wanted to help: “[The patron’s behavior] was not reasonable. You shouldn't be rewarded for yelling at someone, but I also kind of feel like this was a circumstance where someone was trying to get a job and jobs are important.”

Ambivalence extended to colleague helping suggestions. While Natalie did not see herself as someone who should clean up after messy colleagues, she also wanted to be an empathetic member of the family:

> “Initially, I felt like the person who left the room in a mess was inconsiderate, but talking to [them] a little bit more, I understood the circumstances . . . So, I definitely got more understanding.”

Sydney oscillated between being understanding of her colleagues and pushing for things to be done in ways that better matched her autism:

> “I get that I can come off as a little extra, and I feel like an ass for being like, ‘Oh they don't get what I'm doing.’ It’s not that they're intentionally trying to make it hard for me. I know all of these things . . . But it’s just the hardest time for people to [do it that way].”

DISCUSSION

Research into work routines has only recently adopted a critical approach, considering the potential for routines to reproduce and exacerbate existing inequities (Feldman and Pentland, 2022). Because of the constant repetition inherent to routine work, it is easier for these inequities to become normalized and

standardized as *the way we do things around here*. And, as Diamond and Lewis (2019) suggest, these biases are easy to hide. In this study, the ostensive blueprints of routine work did not explicitly direct staff to overwork, help colleagues even when it got in the way of their own work, present as normal, mask their authentic selves, or accept patron abuse. Instead, the routine subtly nudged them to self-align with who others wanted them to be. These findings provide insights into who public library staff are expected to be, how they respond, and what this means for library practice.

Identity Regulation and its Implications (RQ1)

In this study, identity regulation came from several actors and targeted different features of a staff member's identity construction. While vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) showed that the profession often takes on religious undertones—suggesting it is beyond critique and that staff are priests called into its service—the current study shows that identity suggestions often extend beyond the awe-inspiring and influence the specific details of a staff member's construction of the self. In this way, identity regulation in the library is customized for specific contexts and the unique identities of staff within those contexts—often in ways that penalize staff for not meeting the profession's White-IST norms (Mehra and Gray, 2020; Hathcock, 2015).

Many of the identities provided by management mirrored those highlighted by Taylor (1912), including hard work, productivity, and continuous improvement. And while management sometimes relied on overt measures, like codified display guidelines, their efforts were often more subtle. They used things

like self-assessments and goal development exercises to encourage staff to position themselves within prescribed identities. Given that these blueprints were for formal evaluation routines, they were reinforced with disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) that further encouraged staff to define themselves using the language and tools provided by management. Yet, consistent with previous research (Jordan, 2014), management's provision of the language and tools for identity construction were often not backed up with the resources necessary to enact those identities—leading to frustration and confusion.

Patron identity suggestions, centered around customer service, seemed to mirror how the profession defines itself (ALA, 2024). Yet, the experience of participants suggests that patrons adapt this professional identity to fit their egos and sense of entitlement. Here, the "enchanting myth of customer sovereignty" (Korczynski and Evans, 2013, 770) is reinforced to such a degree that patrons feel justified even in their most unreasonable demands (Fisk and Neville, 2011). This myth broke down when participants said no to a room reservation, failed to discipline a loud child, or refused to remove materials patrons found offensive. A gay or Black staff member's very presence in the library could erase the myth when patron suggestions centered around whiteness (Hathcock, 2015) and heteronormativity. Maintaining a clear sense of the display rules (Matteson and Miller, 2013) that guided their reactions, some participants found it necessary to hide their alternative identity in an attempt to pass as being in alignment with patron expectations. Consistent with Reid (2015), these efforts were labeled as successful from the perspective of patrons and management but resulted in

feelings of inauthenticity and depression for participants. Those determined to maintain an alternative identity often found that their only option was to avoid interaction with patrons altogether. Yet, participants also relied on the display rules, embedded within go-to customer service scripts, to navigate difficult interactions. In these instances, participants dis-identified with some parts of the patron identity suggestion while identifying with a general goal of service. This ambivalence—what Elsbach (1999) called *schizo-identification*—represents an adaptive response that enables staff to "split their social identifications with the organization in ways that adaptively connect their self-concepts to a positive organizational identity and distance it from a negative one" (182).

Colleague identity suggestions centered around help, support, and collegiality—backed up with the language of family. In some ways, invoking the family motif may be even more powerful than the religious motif highlighted by Ettarh (2018). As members of a family, staff are expected to sacrifice their time for the benefit of their colleagues and to consider the expectations of others as secondary to those of the family. The expectation to not point out mistakes suggests a deference to colleagues reminiscent of the obligation to respect one's parents. As many in biological families can attest to, these behaviors are often compulsory rather than voluntary. This suggests a shift in libraries from organizational citizenship behaviors to CCBs—when "engaging in OCBs becomes so normative that [staff] must continually do more OCBs in order to be seen as going the extra mile" (Bolino et al. 2013, 544).

Staff Responses to Identity Regulation (RQ2)

Library staff employed a variety of strategies in response to identity regulation. Overall, findings suggest that successful dis-identification was associated with increased self-confidence and feelings of safety. When suggested identities centered around things like community service and support, identification was generally viewed as helpful and adaptive. Yet, as was the case when participants masked important parts of their identity, identification was not always self-enhancing (Elsbach, 1999). Instead, it could lead to a decreased sense of authenticity and increased psychological stress (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Talaifar and Swann, 2017). Outcomes were multifaceted, however, as noted by the uncovering of two additional types of responses to identity regulation. Staff wanting to dis-identify but lacking the resources necessary to do so experienced a sense of self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009)—unable to mobilize alternative identities that felt authentic. This can lead to decreases in organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and, ironically, OCBs (Muttar, Keir, and Mahdi, 2019). Staff who wanted to identify but found identification difficult expressed feelings of failure and paranoia. This is similar to Costas and Kärreman's (2016) study of knowledge workers, who failed in their efforts to align themselves with identities around creativity and autonomy. This resulted in boredom and, eventually, an *arrested identity* in which the workers were "drained from drives to mobilize alternative selves and thus engage in resistance" (77).

Practical Implications

This study's findings also have implications for the practice of librarianship, particularly as it concerns the profession's efforts to minimize self-

alienation and arrested identities among staff with underrepresented, marginalized, and/or stigmatized identities. These implications can be considered through the lens of Webster et al.'s (2018) notion of *contextual supports*. The first support type includes formal policies and practices signaling that staff identities are respected and valued. Knox (2024) suggested that a library's policies not only define its values, but they also embody them. As such, they should reflect core values of the profession "that stand on the side of human flourishing and autonomy" (p. 120). While Knox was referring to freedom of expression in things like access to differing viewpoints and meeting rooms, it follows that this freedom should extend to a staff member's own free expression of self. Policies should clarify the responsibilities of staff in the face of unreasonable patron demands, particularly when those demands signal to staff that they don't belong in the library. Staff need to know the options available to them for successfully dis-identifying with or avoiding these problematic identity suggestions, as well as the options available for coping with identity threats. Participants appreciated it, for instance, when they were afforded time off after stressful events at work without needing to justify their request.

Given participants' struggles with vague guidelines, policies should also clarify standards for productivity and improvement. Otherwise, staff may end up overworking themselves as they attempt to meet a vague notion of "giving 110%." This is common in careers that afford workers increased autonomy (Pèrez-Zapata et al. 2016). Policies that more clearly and equitably distribute work effort can also limit the pressure to engage in CCBs, which tends to fall

more on vulnerable and marginalized workers who are subject to *identity taxation* (Hirshfield and Joseph, 2012). As summarized by An, Barboza-Wilkes and Resh (2024): “It is exactly because you are [a given identity] that you have to work harder and prove your worth” (6).

A second type of contextual support is a climate that affords psychological safety, positive social interactions, and freedom to express one’s true self (Webster et al. 2018). The current study’s findings suggest that one way to achieve this is by providing staff with the cultural raw materials (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and space with which they can construct and mobilize their own identities—ones that may counter those suggested by management, patrons, and colleagues. Research on concealable stigmatized identities, for instance, shows that workplace disclosure is associated with positive mental and physical outcomes, while identity concealing is associated with decreased well-being (Follmer, Sabat, and Siuta, 2020). Libraries can also provide identity suggestions to staff that reinforce the value of who they are. In Jammaers and Zanoni’s (2021) study, for instance, the identities of disabled workers was regulated in ways that enabled them to see themselves as valued and welcomed. This was accomplished as the organization centered the identity suggestions for all workers around care and respect while also clarifying the organization’s employment of disabled employees as a deliberate choice rather than a legal mandate.

A third type of contextual support is meaningful relationships that offer emotional, instrumental, and informational support (Webster et al., 2018). Given that much of the identity regulation that happens at work is hidden behind work

routines, emotional support might include affirming the existence of identity regulation and its implications. Hathcock and Sendaula (2017), for instance, suggest the use of *micro-affirmations* to counter the effects of constant microaggressions. When patrons question a staff member's right to exist in the space, tangible support might look like direct intervention to counter the regulation attempt. Hathcock and Sendaula (2017) refer to this as *bystander intervention*, which involves White librarians stepping in to disrupt racist behavior when they see it. Finally, when a staff member's attempts to dis-identify are blocked—e.g., the denial of accommodations—informational support might include alternative options for obtaining the necessary accommodations.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study sought to understand the routine experiences of several staff with identities that are, in some way, marginalized or stigmatized. While this focus was deemed necessary given the limited amount of previous research on identity regulation and library work, it also limits the study's ability to make specific conclusions about the experiences of any one identity grouping. Because the experiences of staff with these identities differ greatly, additional research is needed with specific staff, e.g., LGBTQIA+ staff, BIPOC staff, staff with mental or physical disabilities and illnesses. Because the current study asked staff about their perceptions of identity regulation, it also cannot account for the accuracy of these perceptions. Additional research with management, patrons, and colleagues could reveal different perceptions on identity regulation, including the contents of that regulation and its justification. By asking participants to talk about frustrating

routine experiences, the study also limited data collection to mostly negative experiences. Thus, it cannot account for the positive experiences of staff and how libraries are actively supporting them. Additional research is needed to identify what libraries are already doing well and how these efforts can be expanded.

CONCLUSION

As a result of its mission and focus on communities, library work is constantly changing. With these changes comes increasing demands on the identities of library staff. These demands are not inherently problematic, and some may be necessary to fulfill the library's mission. Identity demands become problematic, however, when they ask staff to be people they do not recognize or to mask important parts of who they are. Libraries should work to implement proactive support structures that increase a staff member's ability to fulfill the library mission without sacrificing core components of their identity.

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