

# **“Louder for the people in the back:” Amplifying historically marginalized voices through qualitative research**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Racial segregation in publicly funded libraries in the United States was generally accepted until 1964 when the Civil Rights Act made it illegal. Today, public libraries continue to be beset by underrepresentation and discrimination. Current literature calls to improve the LIS landscape by integrating social justice and equity into research, education, and practice while also confronting systemic racism. In this paper, we posit to improve LIS research by diversifying representation through qualitative methods by including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) perspectives and participation to help address the persistent negative impacts of racial discrimination. We demonstrate how qualitative methods are vital to more fully elicit the stories, experiences, feelings, and perspectives of historically marginalized populations. We include advice through verbatim quotations from a BIPOC community leader with extensive experience with LIS research which promotes understanding and empathy as LIS continues to confront historical and contemporary racial discrimination.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Social Justice; Research Methods; Community Engagement; Specific Populations; Community and Civic Organizations; Community-Led Services

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Qualitative Research Methods; Social Justice; Community Engagement; Underrepresented Populations

## **INTRODUCTION**

Prior to the legislation which emerged from the social and political activism of the United States' Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, elected state and local government leaders either actively supported the prevailing racial social ideas characterized by racial discrimination which resulted in racial segregation or passively stood by policies which restricted African American access to public spaces—including public libraries. However, racial segregation was never universally accepted. As far back as 1902 scholars and activists like W. E. B. DuBois spoke out publicly against the injustices of federally funded public facilities that refused service to, at the time, a third of America's population in many urban centers (Brady and Abbott, 2015). While the activism of DuBois and others did not result in the racial integration of public libraries, their work did bring forth separate funding streams to establish "colored branches" which were added to public library systems beginning in 1905 (Tucker, 1998). Peaceful protests, sit-ins and other forms of civil disobedience to create racial equity in public facilities continued over the next 60 years until this part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would specifically make racial discrimination in public spaces and public libraries illegal (Brady and Abbott, 2015). While racial segregation in publicly funded facilities was made illegal in 1964, today almost 60 years later, racial discrimination persists across the United States in more tacit exclusionary policies and indirect actions which result in racial inequity across taxpayer funded spaces.

## **LACK OF RACIAL INCLUSION IN LIS RESEARCH AND EDUCATION**

Libraries are, in fact, still wrestling with underrepresentation and discrimination. For instance, even organizations like American Library Association (ALA) have not updated their Diversity Counts, a comprehensive study of gender, race, and age in the library profession, since

2007 (American Library Association, 2007). In addition, the ALA Librarianship and Library Staff Statistics which provides resources on librarian staffing and diversity in the library workforce have not been updated since 2009 (American Library Association, 2009). However, Data USA reported in 2019 that 5% of degrees awarded in LIS were to individuals who identified as Black or African American (Data USA, 2019). Also, the National Center for Education Statistics found that only 6% of college faculty identified as African Americans in 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

While LIS researchers and practitioners are including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) on research teams and on library staffs in an attempt to illuminate these historical and contemporary issues, there is still a wide body of literature that describes the lack of racial diversity in LIS as a profession (Croxtton et al., 2016; Harper, 2020). Lack of racial diversity among practicing librarians and library administrators persists (Buddy & Williams, 2005; Morgan et al., 2009) among Masters' students and doctoral students (Jaeger et al., 2011), and among both teaching and research LIS faculty (Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010). This absence of diversity and equity in LIS research is partially due to BIPOC not being engaged in research projects (Senteio et al., 2021). This paucity of research and underrepresentation has resulted in LIS research not achieving its potential to successfully impact social justice and eradicate racism in the field. Racial

diversity is essential for a field that prides itself on investigating issues associated with racial equity because all of us are susceptible to the negative influences of racial bias and stereotyping.

Current literature calls to change the LIS landscape and identifies the importance of integrating social justice and equity across LIS research, education, and practice (Cooke, 2019; Fritch, 2018; A. Gibson et al., 2018; Irvin, 2019; Kumasi & Manlove, 2015; Ndumu, 2021; Noble & Sullivan, 2014). This literature outlines specific resources and steps to help decrease racial prejudice, and the field has acknowledged that structural changes are necessary to reduce racial discrimination (Williams & Cooper, 2019). However, Senteio et al. (2021) explores how LIS researchers and practitioners can help promote racial equity while addressing underrepresentation by purposely integrating both the participation and perspectives from individuals belonging to BIPOC groups—beyond simply including them as study subjects in LIS research or by realizing exclusionary practices which disproportionately impact them as patrons in public libraries. LIS researchers specifically can promote racial equity and inclusion by actively including BIPOC in community-based, qualitative research.

Nascent LIS literature acknowledges and confronts systemic racism in the field. Mehra & Gray (2020) express that LIS, as a discipline, “own up” to their historical and contemporary “White-IST” trends which have too often been considered “normative” (Mehra & Gray, 2020).

Mehra and Gray (2020) refer to the need to “own up” to historical lapses and identify constraints in contemporary LIS practices, because doing so is imperative for reconciliation, retribution, and opposing the “White-IST” tendencies on which this profession has been built which still exist.

Senteio et al. (2021) posits diversifying LIS research by including BIPOC perspectives and participation as a way for LIS researchers to help address the persistent negative impacts of racial discrimination. Intentionally designing studies to include BIPOC representation at the inception of the research process, beyond just including them as research subjects, offers unique and valuable designs. Also, the community based-participatory research (CBPR) approach can result in research collaborations that yield deeper understanding of underrepresented groups which help lay the foundation for reciprocity that transcends specific projects. These types of community-researcher partnerships result in LIS research informed with relevant insights on specific local, social, cultural, and environmental nuances which researchers typically do not adequately appreciate or understand. The community partners are the experts for many relevant issues and their inclusion provides LIS researchers the opportunity to learn. CBPR is only one of several approaches to more inclusive research.

## **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS CAN RESULT IN INSIGHTS NOT POSSIBLE USING QUANTITATIVE METHODS**

Qualitative methods are necessary for eliciting the stories, experiences, feelings, and perspectives of study participants. Prior research has shown that racialized stress, exposure to violence, and discrimination are experienced by racial minority groups in virtually all areas of

life including health, education, and living conditions (Cyrus, 2017; Geronimus et al., 2006; Hillier, 2003; McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). While quantitative methods are useful for understanding the degree of inequities, it is limited in understanding what coping mechanisms are used by those living with racism and discrimination, how the racism and discrimination is experienced, and potential approaches to address the unhealthy effects. But qualitative methods are vital to understanding lived experiences which gives a necessary voice to underrepresented groups. For instance, qualitative methods have been used to measure the increased physical manifestations of exposure to racialized stress in Black Americans, especially in Black women (Geronimus et al., 2006). However, qualitative methods can elicit verbatim quotes, perceptions, and feelings which enable better understanding of the experiences of those who have been oppressed.

Conducting effective research that represents historically marginalized populations requires understanding the perspectives of the communities we seek to study. In general, the stories that White Americans tell about racism and the stories that Black Americans tell about racism are very different. White Americans conceptualize progress and meritocracy through color blindness, whereas Black Americans discuss continuing discrimination with a cycle of progress and retreat (Bell, 2003). This conflicting view of discrimination contributes to the systemic injustices seen within institutions and institutional mistrust. Harrington (2019) explains that the history of injustice in research helps create and sustain mistrust, and unintentional harm may be caused by researchers that misunderstand how sociocultural and political environments influence perceptions by members of racial minority groups. To understand these perceptions, LIS researchers must get story rich data through qualitative methods and meet participants where they are. By working with historically marginalized populations to discover and then amplify their voices, we can begin to understand and address the mistrust elicited by historical research interactions.

## **LIS CAN REFER TO OTHER DISCIPLINES TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY SUCCESSFULLY GRAPPELED WITH DISCRIMINATION**

There is a growing body of research which illuminates the similarities between LIS and Social Work research and practice (Cathcart, 2008; Luo et al., 2017; Soska & Navarro, 2020; Wahler et al., 2020). For instance, social work was an inclusive professional organization from its very inception in the 1930s—at a time when racial discrimination was quite pervasive and so few national professions were racially integrated. Both racial and gender inclusion was a tenant of the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) in the ways they worked with individuals and in their membership criteria (Senteio & Matteucci, 2017). Senteio and Matteucci (2017) offer insight into how social work leaders handled fundamental differences in approaches of how to address racial discrimination. They examine social justice advocacy efforts for racial inclusion because they are informative in understanding the social work profession's own struggle with approaches to address racial discrimination. From its establishment, the NCSW signed nondiscrimination agreements to protect its members from segregation efforts at conference hotel locations. In the early years of the conference, 1935 and 1936, the NCSW experienced various incidents of

attendees being refused service at hotels, which prompted NCSW delegates to defend their members when the hotel breached their non-discrimination agreement. Despite previous racially hostile incidents, integration occurred without incident at the 1937 NCSW conference and at subsequent conferences. These advocacy efforts illustrate the value of a variety of activist strategies that continue to intertwine social justice reform in contemporary battles against prejudice which are directed at marginalized populations like African Americans (Senteio & Matteucci, 2017). From the very beginning, advocacy for racial minority peers was ingrained in the social work profession.

Unlike social work, LIS, as a profession, was not focused on supporting and defending marginalized racial populations. Therefore, LIS must confront its role in racial segregation stemming from racial bigotry. We provide experiences and anecdotes from a conversation with two community leaders (from the same community) with whom the third author has known for 10 years and has worked closely with for 8 years.

One community leader with vast experience partnering with LIS researchers on various CBPR projects described their specific experiences with two LIS researchers which appropriately illustrates how to engage with communities and, on the other end of the spectrum, how **not** to:

*“[I had] a really positive experience working with her [LIS researcher]. She was very knowledgeable about her field, but she was also willing to learn and admit what she didn’t know about community and was willing to learn and willing to work with community. She recognized the fact that we were the professionals in terms of community, and we knew what would work best for our community.”*

*“On the other side of that was [a different LIS researcher]. And she was very resistant to change and resistant to acknowledging that community had a positive contribution to make and that we were the experts in terms of our knowledge and [the knowledge of] our community. So, I’ve had a bit if a positive and negative... (elaborating on the negative experience) she had these negative, stereotypical beliefs about the African American community and what occurred in that community. She did not necessarily verbalize her beliefs per say but her behavior and her actions—those actions came out. But also, some of the words that she said, and they were offensive.”*

The above community member portrays two different experiences with LIS researchers. The first researcher worked to understand the existing strengths within the community, established a nurturing, reciprocal relationship with the community, and empowered both the researchers and the community members. The second researcher appeared to let her preconceived notions and biases impede her ability to build and nurture reciprocal relationships with community members, so much so that the community partners had no choice but voice their concerns to the Principal Investigator. From these experiences, the community partner offered sound advice for LIS researchers endeavoring to work with community members:

*“Don’t make assumptions about the community. Don’t assume that you know who they are and what motivates them to be involved. You actually sit down and get to know the community [outside of the project]. I always give them [researchers] a tour of the city of where they’ll be working so they can actually lay eyes on it and go out and get into some of the stores and venues within the community where you can see what’s going on, you can interact with the people, and you can see the disparity and the injustice, but also, so that you can see the strengths of the community. Don’t come in just assuming that the whole city is falling apart.”*

Nascent LIS research reflects similar calls for inclusion by applying CBPR principles (Cooke, 2019; Croxton et al., 2016; Fritch, 2018; A. N. Gibson et al., 2020; Harper, 2020; Irvin, 2019; Kumasi & Manlove, 2015; Ndumu, 2021; Noble & Sullivan, 2014). Doing so can help LIS researchers understand the importance of establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships throughout the research process. Doing so requires that they identify and work to minimize the negative impact of their own biases and conceptualize that community collaborators may be the experts in vital areas of the research process.

## CONCLUSION

For decades, LIS has attempted to confront racial inequity in both research and practice; however, racial bigotry and bias persist (Mehra & Gray, 2020). It is crucial that LIS recognize our history and contemporary practices which contribute to persistent racial inequity. Through the increased use of qualitative methods and community-engaged research, LIS can enhance both research and practice by providing opportunities for racial inclusion. Use of qualitative methods can provide vital voice to those underrepresented which can help to understand the impact of the LIS “White-IST” and enhance our work through inclusion. Intentionally seeking perspectives of members of BIPOC groups helps us recognize the past which continues to support underrepresentation of BIPOC populations. We continue to fall short of prompting real change; however, we can create a future in LIS where voices are no longer silent or ostracized, but where they can be included so we can all understand our experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. Through qualitative and engaged research, we can strengthen the quality of LIS research through enhanced inclusion.

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