Spanish-speakers Preferred: How Libraries Can Make Their Workforce Better Reflect Their Communities

Andrew A. Wakelee[a] and Kim M. THompson[b]

[a]Fresno City College, USA

[b]University of South Carolina, USA

Andrew.Wakelee@Fresnocitycollege.edu, KimThompson@sc.edu

ABSTRACT

While Spanish is the most spoken non-English language in the United States (US), Spanish-speakers face barriers to information access that may continue to impede their inclusion and careers in libraries. Despite a stated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the library profession continues to greatly underrepresent Spanish speakers in its collections and workforce. By looking at Social Identity Theory and the Theory of Information Poverty, we propose ways for libraries to better meet the needs of Spanish-speakers and to better include them in their workforce. This paper details an overview of the theoretical framework, provides a literature review on the Spanish-speaking community's relationship to libraries, analyzes US job ads data for inclusive wording towards Spanish-speaking applicants, and provides practical steps that libraries can take to make their workforces and outreach programs more inclusive.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

critical librarianship; social justice; community engagement; information seeking

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

US job ads; inclusion; Hispanic-Serving Institutions; Spanish language

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2020 Census, the Latinx community accounts for 18.7% of the United States (US) population (US Census Bureau, 2021a), making this the largest ethnic minority group in the country. Although "Latinx" and "Spanish-speaking" are not synonyms, 73% of

people who are Latinx speak Spanish at home (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). While the Latinx community's share of the US library workforce (librarians and library assistants) is growing – from 2.25% in 1998 (Lynch, 2007) to 6.8% in 2022 (Zippia, 2022) -- the workforce does not adequately represent the communities served and languages spoken by these institutions, nor is the growth proportionate to the growth of the Latinx community (50% increase from 2000 to 2010 and 23% increase from 2010 to 2020 (Passel, Lopez, & Cohn, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2010), whereas the nation's overall US population averaged approximately 9.7% growth from 2000 to 2010 and 7.4% from 2010 to 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2021b). Libraries across the nation consider diversity to be a core value, even though few libraries actually reflect the diversity of their communities. This is true across library sectors where managerial positions especially are dominated by white managers (McKenzie, 2017). Our paper identifies barriers to inclusion in the library workforce for Spanish-speakers using Social Identity Theory and the Theory of Information Poverty.

Social Identity Theory looks at how social identification with one's in-group impacts behaviors. An individual's identification with their in-group becomes an important part of their personal identity and predicts their information seeking habits (McLeod, 2019). A similar theory that looks specifically at the roles of in-groups and out-groups in a Library and Information Science (LIS) context is the Theory of Information Poverty. This theory, pioneered by LIS researcher Elfreda Chatman (1996), argues that marginalized groups of people may view themselves as lacking information sources that might help them, and be cut off from larger information environments as a result. This paper will explain these theories in greater detail, provide a literature review on Spanish-speaker's relationship to libraries, analyze US job ad data for inclusive wording specific to Spanish-speaking applicants, and will provide recommendations for libraries to make their workforces more reflective of their communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory was introduced by social psychologist Henri Tajfel in the 1970s as a way of explaining and describing behavior based on social differences (McLeod, 2019). This theory posits that people within one's own social group, with whom we most closely identify, have the biggest impact on our behavior (Vinney, 2019). Giles and Johnson (1987) expanded this theory in developing their ethnolinguistic identity theory, which focuses on language as a sign of group membership and identity. Speaking Spanish in the US may be seen as the "in-group" language for a population within the context the predominantly English-speaking "out group" context of US communities, creating a sense of group membership and creating a positive group identity (Hansen & Liu, 1997).

Social Identity Theory is commonly seen within information contexts, particularly regarding the concealment of or access to information (Bingley et al., 2021). A shared social identity can act as a sort of "social glue" that holds a group together, gives individuals within the group a sense of purpose and identity, and improves collective performance. In this close-knit context, members of the social group tend to trust in-group members more than out-group members. Regulating information access to social groups through language barriers can have

negative consequences by shutting underrepresented groups out of larger information worlds. This is a common challenge for libraries of all sorts, as they seek to serve and provide information access to diverse groups of people, including individuals who may be a part of a strong but insular social group.

Furthering the application of Social Identity Theory to the information access context, we can see how this relates to the work of library and information science researcher Elfreda Chatman. Chatman (1996) explored concepts of information poverty, or the lack of information available inside or outside of an information "small world", or personalized social grouping. Chatman's work made a connection between information poverty and social identity, especially within groups considered outsiders within a larger community. Social outsiders are less likely to seek help to address their information needs due to perceived negative consequences outweighing potential gains. Consequently, this may limit new information from flowing into their information world. Social Identity Theory and Chatman's Theory of Information Poverty can help explain the lack of diversity, specifically among the Spanish-speaking community in libraries and provide ideas for diversifying the library workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spanish-speakers and members of the Latinx community rate libraries as an important service; however, despite strongly supporting libraries, they are also less likely to take advantage of their services (Brown & Lopez, 2015). Individuals who speak Spanish at home are likely to be familiar with the role of public libraries in the community. Public libraries tend to have a very local, community outreach focus that can be successful in bringing in diverse members of the community. However, the lack of diversity among librarians contributes to this reluctance to use libraries, as studies show that people turn to those who look like them to meet their information needs (Hastings, 2015). This may also be the case in school libraries, which have the potential to be a "safe space" for students of Latinx or Spanish-speaking background; a place to feel part of the larger school community (Card, 2019). Likewise, research shows that Latinx or Spanish-speaking university students are often first-generation and less familiar with university structures and services, including academic libraries (Bladeck, 2019; Long, 2011).

The American Library Association (ALA) states that equity, diversity, and inclusion are core values of librarianship (2008), albeit libraries remain a non-Hispanic white-dominated profession. Although non-Hispanic whites made up 57.8% of the total US population in the 2020 Census (2021), this group represents over 80% of the library profession (Zippia, 2022). A study of academic libraries found that 89% of librarians in leadership or administrative roles at Association of Research Library institutions were non-Hispanic whites (McKenzie, 2017). Although the share of Latinx librarians has grown, this is still a significantly underrepresented group in the profession.

The lack of ethnic and language diversity in libraries may be partially explained by "pipeline" problems (Espinal, 2003). Although 21.7% of US undergraduate college students identified as Latinx in 2019 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021), these students are likely to be first-generation college students, and/or graduate from bachelor's programs at lower

rates than the general population (Bladeck, 2019), thereby shrinking the pool of potential Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students. Librarians whose primary language is Spanish may also face unique barriers such as implicit bias when entering the field if they speak English fluently but with an accent (Espinal, 2003).

An additional barrier to Spanish-speaking librarian candidates is the cost of an MLIS, which is required for most professional library positions. This, coupled with the relatively low pay in the profession (Dixon, 2020) and the requirement for relevant experience, which often is satisfied by completing an unpaid internship, may also be barriers to entering the workforce. Furthermore, upon entering the library profession, librarians of color face additional explicit and implicit barriers that may cause them to leave the workforce (Riley-Reid, 2017). Especially in academic library contexts, where a newly appointed Spanish-speaking Latinx librarian may be the only minority librarian, explicit barriers contributing to their lack of inclusion may be feelings of isolation resulting from the lack of diversity as well as tenure or other job related expectations. Implicit barriers may include internal pressure that Latinx librarians put on themselves to conform to the mostly non-Hispanic white culture around them.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is a research method that examines recorded communication in quantitative and/or qualitative ways. In both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, words, themes, and concepts are coded within the texts and then analyzed. Content analysis has the potential to provide analysis of both the message and the meaning of the record, and it also provides reflection on the producer of that record. We used a post-positivist approach for this study of advertised library jobs.

The job advertisements were collected from 15 September 2021 through 15 October 2021, resulting in a total of 992 job advertisements. Two US job sites were selected as being the most commonly searched ones for LIS sector job hunters: ALA Joblist and Indeed (see Table 1). These two databases cover national job listings and either specialize solely in library jobs (e.g., ALA) or are searchable for most library related job posts (e.g., Indeed).

Table 1
Keywords and Limits Across Databases

	Included search terms	Limites or filters applied
ALA	All relevant advertisements	Date limited
Indeed	Librarian, library	Any classification, date limited

Each of the retrieved job listings was reviewed for duplication and relevance. Only jobs that include library related service to library patrons were included. Part-time and full-time position ads were collected if the listing met the above stated criteria. For the analysis, a shared

set of spreadsheets were created and key characteristics were entered in multiple columns. These included state, date posted, advertising institution, type of library, position description, type of position (full-time or part-time), knowledge/skills required, other desirable characteristics, Equal Employment Opportunity statement (if provided), and additional caveats. Additional columns listed diversity specific wording, including Spanish-speaking, Hispanic, or Latino/a/x specific wording (e.g., "Spanish language preferred"). For the purposes of this paper, we will only examine those job ads that were coded for this specific wording.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

While not all who identify as Latinx speak or understand Spanish, interest in providing Spanish-language services in libraries is one way to observe efforts of inclusion for the Spanish-speaking subset of Latinx users. Desire for applicants with non-English language ability was mentioned in 126 (12.7%) of the 992 total job ads collected, listing an array of languages including Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, French, Greek, American Sign Language and more. Some ads simply noted that "bilingual" staff or staff speaking "non-English languages" were sought. Out of all ads collected, 77 (7.8%) were coded as containing Spanish-speaking specific interest, or 62% of the 125 ads that asked for linguistic diversity. Examples of this wording might be "Spanish-fluent applicants are strongly encouraged to apply" or "Spanish fluency is required and paid through a language stipend." Those coded in this category mentioned a preference for Spanish-speaking applicants, programs specific to "Latinos" or "Hispanics", or identified themselves as a "Hispanic-Serving Institution" (13 mentions). Among the 77 Latinx specific ads, 50 (65%) required an MLIS Degree. The percentages of ads with Latinx specific wording in Indeed (7.8%) and the ALA joblist (7.7%) were nearly identical. There were 64 (6.5%) overall that included specific mention of Spanish language. Public libraries were far more likely to have Spanish language interest than academic libraries, with a count of 44 (11.8% of public library ads) compared to 24 (5.7% of academic library ads). Only one school library ad contained this wording.

Not surprisingly, the libraries most likely to have this inclusive wording in their advertisements were from states with larger shares of Latinx residents and Spanish-speakers. The states with the highest raw counts and percentages of Spanish-speaking/Latinx-inviting ads were California (13, 16.7% of its ads), Colorado (9, 31% of its ads), and Texas (18, 18.7% of its ads). The western region, including the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado had the largest share, with a total of 41 (23.4% of the ads from these states). Notable examples of inclusive wording from the ads include one from the County of Mendocino, California's public library and from the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB). The County of Mendocino's ad is bilingual, stating "Bilingual English/Spanish encouraged to apply. Se buscan personas bilingües en inglés y español." UCSB's ad contains the wording: "As the first AAU [Association of American Universities] institution to be designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), the campus takes pride in its student diversity, which includes the largest percentage of Latino/a students in the AAU." These ads follow best practices by making language inclusiveness clear and underlining the importance of diversity in their community.

The stronger focus on inclusive language in public library ads may reflect their high outreach and community centered approach. Surveys also show that Latinx and other minority populations actively support public libraries and their social role in the community (Brown & Lopez, 2015). This demonstrates the crucial role of social identity and information access. Academic libraries may benefit from expanding outreach efforts similar to public libraries, as well as including wording in their job ads that reflects the diversity of their communities (or potential communities). This will help make their programs and job openings more appealing and accessible to the Latinx community and Spanish-speakers.

CONCLUSION

By examining the role of social identity and gaps in information access, barriers still exist for the Spanish-speaking community entering the library profession. Both the library workforce and library job ads do not fully reflect the diversity of their communities. To address this, libraries should help remedy pipeline issues that lead to a less diverse pool of MLIS candidates. This could mean having a more visible role for school librarians and inviting librarians from various sectors to present to K-12 students about careers in libraries. LIS programs should also actively recruit first-generation and English as a second language students and improve access to scholarships and paid internship opportunities. Additionally, job ads should publish salary ranges so that both potential grad students and current job candidates know what they are getting into.

Libraries should make a concerted effort to improve language diversity among their staff and in their outreach materials. Especially in communities with a significant Spanish-speaking population, job ads should specifically note Spanish-speaking as a preferred skill and post the ad in both Spanish and English. Also, noting the level of language proficiency expected would strengthen job ads for this area of inclusion, such as specifying whether fluency or conversational ability is desired. However, this would require some sort of proficiency evaluation, which could get complicated, especially if the interviewing team does not speak Spanish themselves. But having a clear criteria before hiring for language diversity is an important discussion for search committees to have.

Finally, libraries should include relevant courses to Spanish-speaking students in their LIS programs and offer mentoring programs for students and early career librarians. Libraries should also emphasize the social and cultural space that they can provide to their community. By addressing these areas, librarians can help better include the Spanish-speaking community by addressing the cost and feasibility of going to library school, making bilingual language skills an asset, and making more members of the community see themselves reflected in the institution.

Future research should explore how much of an impact inclusive wording actually has on the workforce's diversity. While it is not surprising to find states with large Spanish-speaking populations with more diverse wording, it is unclear what impact the wording itself has on diversity in the workforce. Studies should also go deeper into the implications of the pipeline issues with respect to where to post job ads to increase diversity in the job applicant pool and focus on strategies for retention in MLIS programs and library jobs.

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