Identity-Based Routines in Public Library Work   University of South Carolina   1

The University of South Carolina (SC) School of Information Science requests $304,732 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to support a 3-year participatory applied research project. This project aims to address challenges associated with the influence of identity-based routines (IBRs) on the work of public library staff. In collaboration with public library staff, this project aims to uncover the knowledge work associated with IBRs, support staff efforts to manage IBRs in ways that fulfill their own work-related needs, and inform the efforts of library management to shift IBRs in ways that support the development and retention of diverse staff (agency objective 1.2; program objective 2.2).

Project Justification: Public library staff are subjected to a variety of work stressors that can negatively impact morale and wellbeing, from job insecurity to overt physical and verbal abuse.[1] Routines, which lay out the taken-for-granted blueprints or recipes that staff are expected to follow at work,[2,3] represent a significant source of this stress. This is because, while routines can support the efforts of staff, they can also represent significant barriers. In an IBR, expectations for work behavior center around issues of identity and expression, suggesting what staff should do because of who they are. For instance, management might expect BIPOC staff to follow rigid work procedures or restrict their pursuit of career goals.[4] Women and staff of color might be expected to look past abusive customer behavior to continue providing "excellent customer service."[5] The assumptions built into technological routines might represent barriers for staff from non-dominant social groups.[6] The resulting frustration and burnout are leading to high rates of attrition among minority staff.[7] Yet, because these routines are rarely stated explicitly, they are often allowed to operate unchecked in the background.

However, staff are not completely bound by routines. Rather, they can develop and implement workarounds[8] based on their own routines and expectations for what they will get out of work and what they will be able to avoid.[9] These workarounds may enable staff to continue following a routine, challenge a routine, or ignore a routine altogether. These same workarounds may also result in additional barriers. And while research has considered the influence of more explicit expectations on library staff—particularly from patrons and management—research is still needed into how these expectations are standardized and normalized in routines and the strategies staff use to work around them. This research can support the profession's attempts to increase room for diversity in the library workforce.[10]

Based on this research, this project seeks to develop training aimed at supporting the efforts of the target population—the nearly 140,000[11] public library staff across the country—to recognize problematic IBRs and work around them in ways that fulfill their own needs. By including staff at each phase, the project serves as a model for participatory research that builds the capacity of staff to engage in research and translate research findings, supporting program goal 2 of "increasing the institutional capacity of libraries." Results will also have implications for a library's efforts to expose, challenge, and shift problematic expectations—ensuring that the burden of change is not merely on individual staff members, but also on the system of routines itself.

Project Work Plan: This project aims to develop library training and tools around answers to the following research questions: 1) How do IBRs guide the work of public library staff?, 2) What happens when elements of a staff member's identity violate the expectations of a routine?, 3) What strategies do staff employ to manage and/or work around problematic IBRs? 4) How do a staff member's own routines and expectations influence their strategies for managing and/or working around IBRs? Practitioners will be involved at each phase, consistent with models of collaborative change research, evaluation, and design.[12]

Year 1: The first phase of the project will include a qualitative study involving a total of 60 frontline library staff across 4 nationally representative public library sites. Recruitment of sites will ensure a diversity of geographic regions, sizes, and types. Data collection methods will include semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and visual elicitation. To uncover problematic IBRs, participants will be asked to draw a self-portrait that highlights the most important elements of their identity, e.g., beliefs, appearance, personality. They will then be asked what they think others expect of them and the extent to which their self-portrait aligns with these expectations. To uncover their own expectations and routines for work, participants will be asked to draw and

describe their ideal workplace and contrast this drawing with their actual workplace. Data will be analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, which attempts to uncover patterns through the application of codes.[13] Given the study's interest in IBRs, the research team will intentionally recruit participants from each site who identify with minoritized populations. To capture additional identities that may violate established routines, beyond those uncovered in previous research, recruitment will not be limited to these populations. The research team will consist of the PI, one Ph.D. student, and 15 project staff. Project staff will include practitioners currently working in each of the 4 study sites, and recruitment will target practitioners representing a diversity of gender, sexual orientation, abilities, class, and race. They will be trained by the PI to support all aspects of the project, including research design, analysis, and dissemination. IBRs are one component of knowledge work in the library, which the PI, Dr. Darin Freeburg, has considered in the context of literacy efforts[14], education[15], nonprofit innovation[16], and library leadership.[17]

Year 2: In the project's second phase, a total of 120 library staff from the areas surrounding each of the 4 study sites will be invited to day-long workshops—organized by the research team. Following models of participatory design,[18] workshop participants will translate the findings of year 1 into a series of case-based learning[19] modules aimed at explaining the nature of IBRs and how staff can manage them in ways that meet their own needs. Participants will also have an opportunity to document and incorporate their own IBR examples and strategies. The research team will then prepare a report for library management outlining the challenges faced by staff, in support of management's efforts to address problematic IBRs.

Year 3: In the project's third phase, the case-based learning modules developed in year 2 will be disseminated through a series of webinars developed by the research team for a national audience of library staff. Attendees will be given an opportunity to share their own experiences with IBRs through the project website, leading to the development of a national database of IBR-related experiences and strategies that will be accessible to libraries and researchers. The report developed in year 2 will be disseminated through a series of webinars for library management. Management attendees will be given an opportunity to provide feedback on the report and consider its implications. This feedback will inform the creation of a graduate-level course on expectation literacy and change management in the library.

Diversity Plan: The proposed project suggests that the very identities of library staff that make them diverse can represent deviations from the expectations of others. These deviations can lead to significant negative impacts like bullying, burnout, and, eventually, attrition. By surfacing problematic IBRs and making management aware of them, this project will support efforts to increase cultural competency across the profession, leading to more "competent, inclusive, and caring professional practice."[20] The training, developed by staff who continuously face these identity-related challenges, will support the efforts of all staff to manage IBRs in ways that decrease their burden. The intentional inclusion of the voices of those representing non-dominate ideologies and norms, therefore, is necessary for the project to achieve its aims.

Project Results: The results of this project will be made available through several avenues. First, results will contribute to practice through the development and implementation of training materials, e.g., webinars, case-based learning, reports, and courses. Staff from across the country will be able to adapt these materials to the specific IBR challenges they face. Second, a website dedicated to the project will enable regular dissemination of findings, as well as provide staff not participating in the project directly with an opportunity to be heard. Third, the results will contribute to research by way of traditional scholarly channels, e.g., journals, conferences.

Budget: A total budget of $304,732 is requested for 3 years of Ph.D. student support, including tuition, stipend, fringe and travel ($95,425); 3 years of PI's summer salary and fringe ($59,802); contracts for 15 library staff contributing 40 hours each year for 3 years ($27,000) and website hosting and technical support ($6,000); travel for PI to conferences, 3 national sites, and one in-state site for research and workshops ($15,400); support for participant incentives and 4 workshop meals ($8,200); transcriptions ($4,000); study materials ($2,750); and indirect costs the university's federally-negotiated indirect rate of 49% ($86,155).