

## CHAPTER 7

# Unpacking Identity

## Racial, Ethnic, and Professional Identity and Academic Librarians of Color

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In 2007, an Association of College and Research Libraries white paper on racial and ethnic diversity in academic librarianship noted, “Although the current environment for recruitment, retention, and advancement of people of color in academic librarianship remains virtually unchanged since the appearance of the 2002 ACRL White Paper,<sup>1</sup> methods and strategies for addressing the issue seem to be evolving.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the same can be said in 2013, which raises the question of why, in spite of evolving efforts, does racial and ethnic diversity among academic librarians remain virtually unchanged?

Despite an abundance of existing literature on diversity in libraries, we lack a multidimensional view on the experiences of academic librarians of color, thus calling for a different lens in research. To get to the root of diversity issues, we must first begin to understand the vocabulary, theory, and context that shape the discussions of diversity, race, and ethnicity in our profession. By applying identity theory, academic librarianship stands to increase its understanding of the success of diversity initiatives and the impact diversity has on its professionals. This exploratory chapter serves as an introduction to racial, ethnic, and professional identity theory to allow us to dig into the deeper, more imperative questions about the experiences of academic librarians of color.

In 2012, the American Library Association released the results of a 2009–2010 “comprehensive study of gender, race, age, and disability in

the library profession”<sup>3</sup> entitled *Diversity Counts*, which found that only 13.9 percent of academic librarians are nonwhite.<sup>4</sup> Disappointingly, the number of nonwhite academic librarians in 2010 decreased by 0.5 percent from the *Diversity Counts* figures in 2000\* while the percentage of nonwhites in the United States population increased 20.5% from 2000 to 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of students of color enrolled in college grew 56 percent, whereas the percentage of white students within the total college student population dropped from 67 percent to 58 percent.<sup>†</sup> For academic librarians, these changing demographics suggest that the student bodies they support are increasingly diversifying. However, as Lorna Peterson critiques, analysis of changing demographics does not tell the full story of what is occurring on campuses and in libraries across the country: “History shows that it is not numbers that dictate the distribution of power and resources.”<sup>6</sup> The demographics in higher education of students, faculty, and librarians are not a sufficient indicator of whether or not academic libraries provide effective services to all students and faculty. How can we even begin to understand our students and faculty if we do not yet acknowledge the complexities of race and ethnicity within our profession?

To illustrate the sometimes invisible or overlooked dynamics of race within libraries, in 2004, John Berry compiled a formative list of examples modeled after the classic article by Peggy McIntosh entitled, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”<sup>7</sup> In his list, Barry exposed commonplace examples of white privilege in libraries such as, “I am never asked in my profession to speak for all the people of my racial group.”<sup>8</sup> In an article on the invisibility of race in library and information science,

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\* Table B-5 in the *Diversity Counts* update indicates that 14.4 percent of librarians in higher education were nonwhite in 2000. The total of nonwhite librarians in higher education in 2009–2010 was 13.9 percent according to Table A-5 American Library Association, “Table A-5: Number of Higher Education Credentialed Librarians by Characteristic, 2009–2010” and “Table B-5: Number of Higher Education Credentialed Librarians by Characteristic, 2000,” in *Diversity Counts* 2012 update (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012), [www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org/offices/files/content/diversity/diversitycounts/diversitycountstables2012.pdf](http://www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org/offices/files/content/diversity/diversitycounts/diversitycountstables2012.pdf).

† Enrollment growth data for students of color is from 2001 to 2011. White student percentage of total student population data is from 1998 to 2008. Young M. Kim, *Minorities in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2011), 2-3, [http://diversity.ucsc.edu/resources/images/ace\\_report.pdf](http://diversity.ucsc.edu/resources/images/ace_report.pdf).

Todd Honma asks, “Why is it that scholars and students do not talk openly and honestly about issues of race and LIS? Why does the field have a tendency to tiptoe around discussing race and racism, and instead limit the discourse by using words such as ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’? Why is the field so glaringly white, yet no one wants to talk about whiteness and white privilege?”<sup>9</sup>

The questions Honma raises are a call for greater understanding and more meaningful conversations about diversity among librarians. Yet when we begin to consider this call to action, we are faced with more questions.

How does diversity impact the academic librarian’s sense of self? More specifically, how do academic librarians of color perceive themselves in a predominantly white profession, and how can we interpret these perceptions to better understand their experiences? The library profession actively encourages diversity through initiatives such as recruitment, residency programs, scholarships, and mentorship to attract and retain librarians of color. As the statistics previously indicated, in spite of ongoing recruitment and retention efforts, the percentage of academic librarians of color in the profession has decreased. Why is this occurring? Perhaps by looking through the lens of identity theory, we will be able to shed light on the experiences of academic librarians of color and how these experiences shape the profession.

Though we want to be able to answer these questions, we cannot begin to conduct meaningful research in this area until we first explore the theoretical foundations of such questions. We must first understand what identity theory is and how professional, racial, and ethnic identities shape our sense of self. By developing a foundational understanding of identity theory, we, as academic librarians, gain a greater context for previous studies and can move forward with future research on diversity within the library profession.

This chapter presents exploratory work on professional, racial, and ethnic identity theory and its application in our understanding of diversity and academic librarianship. To supplement research on identity theory, academic librarians of color were asked to share their experiences in the profession in their own words. Alongside the discussions of identity theo-

ry, quotes and anecdotes are found throughout this chapter, in italics, from academic librarians of color. Although these anecdotes may better explain the material, each is a unique story rather than a generalizable statement. The thoughts and experiences of one academic librarian of color cannot speak for all academic librarians of color. The combination of theory and personal narratives serves as a starting point for facilitating future conversations about race, diversity, and academic librarianship.

### **Words Matter: Race, Ethnicity, and People of Color**

Throughout this chapter, we intentionally use the term *librarian of color*, derived from the idiomatic phrase *people of color*. To better understand the history and meaning of the term *people of color*, we begin by looking at the evolution and implications of race and ethnicity.

These two words, *race* and *ethnicity*, have been manipulated, altered, and redefined multiple times over the course of American history as snapshots of society's categorization of its own people. One example is the origin of the term *Hispanic*, coined by the Richard Nixon administration for the 1970 census.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, the *New York Times* reported that the US Census Bureau declared Hispanics the largest minority group, clarifying this population as an ethnicity, not a race.<sup>11</sup> In another elaboration of racial and ethnic classification, Paul Leung describes the "artificial categorization" of Asian Pacific Islanders that "lumps" various groups under one label.<sup>12</sup> Leung also draws parallels to people labeled black, stating, "Blacks, too, are not homogenous, with cultural variations of origin in Africa, the West Indies, or the Caribbean as well as geographical differences in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

In 1994, the *New Yorker* published a powerful piece by Lawrence Wright that expanded on the fierce history of racial and ethnic classifications controlled by the United States government.<sup>14</sup> Wright supports claims that racial and ethnic classifications essentially represent politics. Data and statistics are created and utilized in a way that end up shaping American identities and result in "political entities" with representation, lobbying interests, and social/political/economic needs. These examples illustrate the argument that race and ethnicity are synthetic and amor-

phous by nature. In other words, just as Dewey is a classification system for books, we use and manipulate race as a classification system for people.

Not only are race and ethnicity fabricated categories, they lack consistent and replicable meaning over time. Across professions, the inconsistent construction and use of race and ethnicity is problematic. Anthropologists have critiqued race as “not a biological fact but a social fact, a social construction.”<sup>15</sup> Some psychologists have called *race* and *ethnicity* sociopolitical and sociocultural terms with inconsistent definitions and multiple influences.<sup>16</sup> Other psychologists have expressed concern with the treatment of *race* and *ethnicity* as interchangeable terms because their definitions have morphed and evolved multiple times over social history.<sup>17</sup> Finally, doctors and health professionals have also critiqued the lack of a scientific basis for racial and ethnic classification, which has resulted in varying definitions, lack of consensus on terminology, data collection inconsistencies, problems of misclassification, inaccurate counting, and much more.<sup>18</sup>

Some may interpret *people of color* to denote African Americans, while others assume it implies the actual color of your skin. Although its origins stem from the abolition era in the United States and later the African American community, the term *people of color* has evolved into a sociopolitical idiom of unity and solidarity among marginalized racial and ethnic communities.<sup>19</sup> The term goes beyond, and replaces, the meaning of *minority* or *nonwhite*.<sup>20</sup>

In 1988, William Safire’s “On Language: People of Color” in *The New York Times* emphasized that “people of color ... should not be used as a synonym for black.”<sup>21</sup> The contemporary meaning of *people of color* took shape after the development of the term *women of color*. Loretta Ross, a reproductive justice activist and scholar, asserts that the origin of the phrase *women of color* took place during discussions at the National Women’s Conference in 1977, where coalition building among racial and ethnic delegate groups began to take shape.<sup>22</sup> The term *people of color* draws upon the intentions of the phrase *women of color* as a means of coalition building and invoking solidarity.

The library profession has adopted similar terminology. The phrase *librarians of color* has been used increasingly to include underrepresent-

ed racial and ethnic groups in the profession. In 1972, E. J. Josey, a black librarian and activist, published "What Black Librarians Are Saying," in which Vivian D. Hewitt used the phrase *librarians of color* in reference to "minority" people.<sup>23</sup> Since 2006, the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) has convened twice with the sponsorship of five American Library Association ethnic caucuses.\* These affiliate groups originate from the 1970s as a response "to a perceived lack of support inside the ALA in dealing with the many issues affecting underrepresented librarians and users."<sup>24</sup> In 1998, the American Library Association established the Spectrum Initiative with aims to address "the underrepresentation of librarians of color within the current workforce."<sup>25</sup> These are only a few examples of how the library profession has addressed diversity initiatives using *librarians of color* to identify librarians from underrepresented groups. The vocabulary used in the profession to describe diversity issues, initiatives, and stakeholders reflects the climate of not only the library sphere but also parent institutions and American society.

In researching this chapter, the authors discovered that a concise, accessible definition of *person of color* was difficult to find. The definition given in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society* most closely resembled our understanding of *person of color* as referring to racial and ethnic minority groups.<sup>26</sup> Thus, to best express our understanding of the term *person of color*, we, the authors, define the term beyond the literal color of one's skin. We are defining the term as referring to individuals who reside in the United States and who belong to minoritized racial and ethnic groups, including but not limited to African, African American, Alaskan Native, Arab, Asian, Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial.

Some argue that the phrase *people of color* is limited. One argument is that the term lumps diverse identities into one mass, overlooking the unique experiences among the various racial and ethnic identities, as well as the racism that can exist within and among these communities.<sup>27</sup> The term cannot be used carelessly, ignoring the fact that our ethnic and racial differences are what create our sense of identity and individual or communal narratives. It does not touch upon intricacies and issues like colonization, diaspora, indigeneity, immigration, nationality, and so much

more. Still, the term is useful because it invites conversation regarding our groups' histories, struggles, politics, and status.

Since 1997, the US Census has abided by the standards for race and ethnicity as provided by the US Office of Management and Budget that categorizes America's diverse population into five main categories individuals can self-identify from: *White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander*.<sup>28</sup> Race and ethnicity are social constructs, and the terms we use to describe ourselves racially and ethnically bear more psychological meaning than scientific merit.<sup>29</sup> They lack significance without human influence. When we asked academic librarians of color to use their own words to claim their racial or ethnic identity, the responses demonstrated the dynamic and dramatically multidimensional ways we self-identify given an open forum sans check boxes:

*Puerto Rican from New York City*

\* \* \*

*African-American, West Indies heritage, first generation American*

\* \* \*

*Ipai/Kumeyaay westerners call us Native American*

Words do matter. They matter in the construction of our identities, how others define us, and how we choose to self-identify in a greater context. Like the words we choose to identify, define, and categorize ourselves, identity is complex, varied, and dynamic.

## Identity Theory

### *What Is Identity?*

Identity is the complex understanding of the fundamental question "Who are you?"<sup>30</sup> "Identities are inescapably *both* personal *and* social not only in their content, but also in the processes by which they are formed, main-

tained, and changed over time.”<sup>31</sup> Each person has multiple forms of an identity existing individually, relationally, or socially, like gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, place of residence, profession, etc.

For the purposes of this chapter, the most prominent elements of identity theory to understand are these:

1. Identity is always in flux, with different meanings in various contexts and times.
2. Individuals develop a sense of self within a social context as intimate as family or school and as grand as government or history.<sup>32</sup>

We shape our understandings of who we are, or our sense of self, based on our social surroundings at every level. Though multiple forms of identity shape our sense of self, in this chapter we focus on two categories—professional identity and racial and ethnic identity—to build an understanding of how these identities can shape the sense of self among academic librarians of color.

### *Professional Identity*

Unlike a job that an individual simply performs to fulfill a necessity like paying the bills, what distinguishes a profession from an occupation is that participants are expected to develop an identity based on the work, position, and values of that profession.<sup>33</sup> Values constructed by a profession may guide its professionals. For example, doctors are guided by professional values outlined in the Hippocratic Oath and library professionals find guidance through values outlined in the American Library Association Code of Ethics. A few academic librarians of color shared how the library profession is incorporated into their sense of self:

*Being a librarian is more than a job to me; it is part of my identity.*

\* \* \*

*[Librarianship has] definitely impacted my professional sense of self, as I have found great personal fulfillment working in this profession.*



Becoming a professional involves more than education or the attainment of specialized knowledge. One study on professional identity among female lawyers found that “successful participation in the field involves more than the simple acquisition of legal skills; it also requires the assimilation of a range of corporeal and psycho-social characteristics.”<sup>34</sup> These findings are key. To be socialized into a profession, one “must master a particular substantive body of knowledge, and [one] must internalize an appropriate professional identity.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, to be successful as an academic librarian, as with any profession, one must not only acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for the job, but also assimilate the characteristics, values, and norms of the profession. As an example, one academic librarian of color shared how values have shifted since joining the profession:

*I think being an academic librarian makes me think about some issues that I had not really pay [sic] too much attention to before, such as censorship, or academic freedom.*

As academic librarians, we can be at different levels of professional identity formation and development. “Professional identity forms over time with varied experiences and meaningful feedback.”<sup>36</sup> Some may feel a strong identity as an academic librarian while others may feel this professional identity is less salient.

The library itself is a site for professional identity formation. “All professions and individual workplaces are systems of power relations and, hence, important sites of identity formation.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, as Honma suggests, a critical look into the sociopolitical history of libraries reminds us of the library’s past as a place of exclusion rather than inclusion—as we want it to be today.<sup>38</sup> In 1972, James R. Wright, a black librarian, recounted an adolescent memory of being turned away from the public library “because I was born black in America,” a reminder that libraries have participated in systems of racial power and oppression.<sup>39</sup> For one academic librarian of color, this history still resonates:

*I feel librarianship has made my sense of identity stronger. As a graduate student I learned that libraries contributed a lot to the*

*fight for intellectual freedom ... and that libraries are an example of the constitution at work (information access, privacy, etc.). At the same time, I learned that these great public institutions, which now do so much for the freedom and equality for their users, were not above limiting information access for minorities during and before the civil rights era. Now, as a librarian of color, I feel I have a little bit more of an obligation to provide a consistent and equal level of service in each interaction with a member of the community.*

What happens when an individual's values come into conflict with the profession or place of work or library in which one is employed? When comparing the values of an individual to the values or culture of an organization, "Organizational culture is probably the more powerful force, which means that if persons for various reasons can *not* move to another organization, they will probably be subjected to strong pressures to conform to that culture and to change their own value system."<sup>40</sup>

Academic libraries, as workplaces situated within larger institutions, have their own value systems and structures of power and reward, such as the tenure system, that contribute to the professional identity of the librarians employed there. Power and reward structures in an organization contribute to a type of "psychological contract" between an employee and employer. Edgar Schein outlines the psychological contract in his classic text on employee-employer relationships:

Through various kinds of symbolic and actual events, a "psychological contract" is formed which defines what the employee will give in the way of effort and contributions in exchange for ... organizational rewards in the form of pay and benefits and an organizational future in the form of a promise of promotion or other forms of career advancement. This contract is "psychological" in that the actual terms remain implicit; they are not written down anywhere.<sup>41</sup>

This means that an implicit system of contributions and rewards exists and functions between an employer and an employee. For example, though there may be explicit terms on conducting research and publishing for

promotion or tenure of an academic librarian, there may also be implicit expectations that these contributions focus on specific topics within the field or be published in certain prestigious journals.

Research on the tenure system in higher education suggests that the value placed on the contributions of faculty of color may carry unequal weight in comparison to contributions from white counterparts. “White faculty who have historically dominated the power brokers of higher education institutions are more likely to fit into and perpetuate previously defined research agendas and values.”<sup>42</sup> In academic librarianship, a study by Damasco and Hodges found that many academic librarians of color perceive race as a reoccurring factor that influences their ability to achieve tenure and promotion. Examples include selection of service and committee work, barriers to research and publication, and access to mentorship.<sup>43</sup> These findings suggest that people of color find remnants of exclusion and discrimination embedded within the reward structure and organizational values of academia and academic libraries.

Damasco and Hodges recommend a mutual understanding between libraries and academic librarians on the definition of value in the tenure and promotion process: “Library faculty of color must find ways to demonstrate the value ... and library administrators must actively appraise and promote diversity research, service, and programming within the larger organizational culture.”<sup>44</sup> The library profession should question how academic librarians of color are impacted by a possible disconnect between their values and the values of the institution. How does a librarian of color navigate the development of a professional identity when one’s values may not align with those of the institution?

### *Racial and Ethnic Identity*

A common misconception lies in the belief that *race* and *ethnicity* are interchangeable terms. The distinction between racial and ethnic identities of people of color are similarly misunderstood. It is important to recognize the distinction between the two concepts in order to begin to understand how they may impact the experiences of academic librarians of color.

Racial identity theory “emphasizes the manner in which individuals respond to and internalize their actions to sociopolitical conditions of oppression.”<sup>45</sup> In the context of librarianship, one academic librarian of color shared,

*When you are an African American librarian, you stand out. For good or bad, you stand out.*

For this particular librarian, identity is influenced by what it means to be African American as well as what it means to be a professional in the library world. Racial identity refers to how individuals psychologically develop responses to socially constructed messages of race dominance and nondominance. Furthermore, racial identity models developed by psychologists elaborate that racial identity is “the process of development by which individual members of the various socioracial groups overcome the version of internalized racism that typifies their group in order to achieve a self-affirming and realistic racial-group or collective identity.”<sup>46</sup> In short, people can experience their sense of racial identity on a spectrum, from self-loathing due to racism projected onto them to pride in identifying with one’s racial group.

An individual can experience racism in many forms that can be explicit or not. Racial microaggressions are implicit, daily slights and negativities toward people of color, done by individuals who communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, messages of racism either verbally or behaviorally.<sup>47</sup> A few academic librarians of color recounted experiences of microaggressions at the workplace:

*When patrons or guests ask to speak to an administrator or manager (I am a library director) and they seem surprised when I introduce myself as such.*

\* \* \*

*[A student] asked to speak to a “real librarian” [ ... ] not sure if it is because I looked young, or wasn’t an old white lady, but he had a*

*hard time believing I was a librarian. My coworker also felt that it was because I was a person of color.*

As psychologists Helms and Cook state:

The racial identity models are intended to describe the process of development by which individual members of the various socioracial groups overcome the version of internalized racism that typifies their group in order to achieve a self-affirming and realistic racial-group of collective identity. The need for such development exists because society differentially rewards or punishes members of societally ascribed racial groups according to their racial classifications.<sup>48</sup>

In short, members of socioracial groups who experience racism, directly or indirectly, develop mechanisms and responses to such experiences that to one degree or another impact their racial identity.

An example of a response individuals feel in relation to their racial identity is the feeling of isolation when functioning in a larger, dominant society. This is illustrated when some academic librarians of color expressed that they felt isolated working in a dominantly white profession:

*I feel more like a foreigner in a very strange land in [the] library world.*

\* \* \*

*I feel more disconnected from my cultural heritage because of the homogenous community and lack of diversity in my institution and profession.*

Yet our individual experiences are multidimensional and dynamic. Therefore, racial identity is not a static concept but has stages or levels of development varying among individuals. This means that some academic librarians of color may have a strong racial identity, that is, a strong sense of racial self, while others do not.

Racial identity theory focuses on the large-scale, societal impact race has on an individual; ethnic identity theory focuses closer to home. Ethnic identity touches on the degree to which individuals identify with the values, norms, languages, and beliefs of their particular ethnic group.<sup>49</sup> Notions of belonging, membership, group affiliation, and emotional connection and commitment to one's ethnic group all fall under ethnic identity.<sup>50</sup> Examples of this in the library profession are the ALA ethnic caucuses, which function as products of ethnic group affiliation and provide librarians with a sense of support and community. Some academic librarians of color shared their feelings of belonging and association:

*[I] have met some wonderful people through ALA, JCLC, and REFORMA that have probably "boosted" my "ethnic" identity.*

\* \* \*

*The Spectrum community has helped to foster my positive ethnic identity.*

\* \* \*

*Meeting other people of mixed racial backgrounds who do not look "ethnic." It's made me feel less alone and more empowered.*

Furthermore, another study on ethnic identity measured and compared the ethnic identity scores—measures of the ability to relate oneself to one's own ethnic background—of African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and white high school students. This research found that ethnic minority groups had significantly higher ethnic identity scores than their white counterparts.<sup>51</sup> It is possible, then, that ethnic identity could resonate strongly within the sense of self of an academic librarian of color.

Ethnic identity theory can be used in practice to better understand and develop recruitment and mentoring opportunities for academic librarians of color. In *Pathways to Progress: Issues and Advances in Latino Librarianship*, Ortega and Ramos describe a need for Latino librarians

to proactively recruit and mentor Latino library science students in a “disproportionately white” profession.<sup>52</sup> They argue that recruiting individuals with the language skills and cultural understanding of this particular ethnic group helps to better serve the growing Latino population in the United States. What this proposed recruiting and mentoring strategy taps into is an understanding of ethnic identity theory and the sense of belonging it can invoke. Ortega and Ramos also note that not every Latino speaks Spanish, illustrating the point that not only does the profession need more diversity, it requires diversity within all of its possible ranges.

Ortega and Ramos also encourage increasing the visibility of librarianship by promoting awareness of the profession to Latinos as early as high school. If we apply ethnic identity theory, we can understand the importance of students and future librarians seeing people of their same ethnic group as librarians already in the profession. Therefore, increasing the visibility of such role models will increase the chances that students of color in higher education will find the profession a welcoming, supportive, and viable career choice. Sergio Chaparro notes, “I strongly believe that recruitment for the LIS profession has its base in the visibility factor. The more we see Latinos in the profession, the more compelled we feel to emulate their efforts.”<sup>53</sup>

Ethnic identity theory can also be applied in our understanding of librarian-student interactions. In 2012, a study on academic librarian approachability tested variables such as race/ethnicity, age, and gender and revealed that race does indeed play a role in the patron’s perception of the librarian.<sup>54</sup> Subjects identified with librarians who most resembled their own racial/ethnic characteristics and rated those librarians as the most approachable. The researchers further connected librarian approachability to student retention and academic success, especially for students of color, who use the library more often than their white peers.<sup>55</sup> Again, Ortega and Ramos suggest a model for mentoring students where “a minority faculty member is matched with a similar minority student” and state that such models “create a nurturing relationship where a faculty member will support and advise the student.”<sup>56</sup> The experience of one academic librarian of

color illustrates a supportive relationship that is fostered with students of the same background:

*When I conduct instruct [sic] sessions where first-generation students are present, I am more conscious and able to relate to their personal experiences and particular information literacy challenges. Because of our similar backgrounds I tend to better understand and relate to their college experience....*

Using the ethnic identity lens, we can understand how a relationship between mentor and mentee or instructor and students of shared ethnic backgrounds can be nurturing, providing both parties with a strong sense of community, belonging, support, and contribution. It is important to note, however, that racial and ethnic identity frameworks address the emotional and mental impact of an individual's experience of being part of racial and ethnic groups; they do not measure behaviors or actions.

Finally, Stephen Quintana, a counseling psychologist, summarized racial and ethnic identity theories and models into five major points:

1. Individuals explore racial/ethnic identity and develop an ethnic group consciousness during adolescence.
2. Encounters with racism trigger racial identity exploration and movement through development levels.
3. Racial identity development ranges from self-loathing to positive identification or pride in one's racial group.
4. Adolescents are prepared by others to develop an awareness of racial discrimination they will or may experience.
5. Racial and ethnic identity development occurs in various levels or stages.<sup>57</sup>

For academic libraries, it is important not only to understand racial and ethnic identity theory, but also to distinguish between the two in order to more accurately address the specific needs of both academic librarians of color and students of color. To consider both racial and ethnic identity is to recognize a more holistic approach to diversity in academic libraries.



### *Identity Is Multidimensional*

These theories alone may be digestible and relatively comprehensible, but when we begin to look at each identity theory in relation to others, the notion of identity becomes much more complex. As illustrated throughout this chapter, many elements can impact how individuals self-identify, such as time, history, generation, size of community, and geography or region.<sup>58</sup> The freedom to claim one's identity, particularly racially and ethnically, can be empowering for people of color. We saw examples of this earlier when librarians of color provided rich responses to a question on self-identification of one's race or ethnicity. A recent piece on National Public Radio featured a young Dominican Republic woman who "came out" as racially black and culturally Latina.<sup>59</sup> Her story and others illustrate that our identities as individuals are claimed, dynamic, and subject to change as well as coexisting with other aspects of identity.

Because identities come in a multitude of forms coexisting with one another, a person can have a gendered, religious, racial, ethnic, political, and professional identity all at the same time. Sociologist Cary Costello describes three different concepts on how multidimensional identities may coexist. The first concept is the idea that identities seamlessly blend "like ingredients mixed together in just the right proportions to create a unique cake of selfhood."<sup>60</sup> In other words, our identity is singular, an amalgamation of all our identities, mixed into one self.

The second concept states that identities are contextual, existing only within the space and time of a given context.<sup>61</sup> For example, one academic librarian of color revealed,

*I am multiracial & multiethnic, and how I identify changes depending on who I am with and where in the world I am.*

The idea of identity as contextual and the librarian's acknowledgement of mediating a contextual identity suggest that what we look like and who we are physically may not influence our identity at every moment. Instead, "context shapes and influences the salience of a racial or ethnic identity."<sup>62</sup>

The third, and perhaps more complex and nuanced, concept of identity is one where identities are independent of one another and possibly change over time, creating the potential for either harmony or conflict with other independent identities:

The self is like a room full of furniture. Each piece of furniture is an identity.... Some identities are always found in the room, like grandma's rocking chair, but others are more like a trendy zebra-striped footstool: unlikely to be there in ten years.... Just as grandma's rocking chair and the trendy footstool coexist awkwardly, so can one's religious identity and one's sexual identity, or one's racial identity and one's professional identity.<sup>63</sup>

As stated earlier, identity is always in flux, like a room with trendy furniture and old furniture, rearranged and changing over time.

This chapter touches upon only a small fraction of identity for academic librarians of color: race, ethnicity, and professionalism. However, we must remember and acknowledge that the salience of any particular aspect of an individual's sense of self will vary. For some librarians, their sexual, political, or gender identity deeply enriches and impacts their experience in the workplace more than their race. We must understand that identity is never static but ever dynamic.

## Conclusion

The number of academic librarians of color in the profession is disproportionately small compared to the diverse student bodies we are charged with serving. A new approach to diversity literature is the application of professional, racial, and ethnic identity theory. Much like the term *people of color*, identity theories carry a practicality. Identity theories get to the psychological root of how an individual forms their sense of self and continues to function in society. As individuals, we form our identities from many avenues and messages, including the vocabulary used by others to identify who you are in society. Terminology, history, statistics, and institutional structures all play a role in a complex system that impacts individuals in one shape or another.

As people of color enter and work in the predominantly white profession, the library field should question what impact the disproportionate representation has on its existing professionals and on potential librarians. The lenses of professional, racial, and ethnic identity allow us to, first, recognize and, second, begin to understand the experiences librarians of color may have and carry. To strengthen diversity initiatives of the library profession, we must understand what shapes people's sense of self, what strengthens it, what challenges it, and what supports it. Although these models do not explain social injustices, discrimination, racism, and prejudice, they do provide us with tools for understanding the experiences carried by people of color who are affected in one way or another by these factors.

Identity theories allow us to look further into how these experiences impact librarians of color and their perceptions of working within the library profession. This chapter has been intended to clarify why words matter, what identity theories are, and how they can be applied. Future qualitative research can apply the identity theories outlined in this chapter and begin to discern whether a pattern of common experiences exists among academic librarians of color. We hope to continue this conversation on race and diversity within the profession through further research, and we hope you, too, will join us in exploring these complex issues in our profession.

## Notes

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