

Fatness and the future of equity, diversity, and inclusion in librarianship

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Land Acknowledgement

I work at an institution that sits on the ancestral land of the Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Peoria, Bodéwadmikiwen (Potawatomi), and Myaamia (Miami) people. ACRL acknowledges that in Pittsburgh we are on Indigenous land that was stolen from the Iroquois (a.k.a., Haudenosaunee, represented by the Seneca), as well as the Shawnee and Delaware (also called the Leni Lenape) peoples. We pay respect to their Elders and their past, present, and future peoples, cultures, languages, and communities.

A note on terminology and content

Why fatness?

About this study

In-depth interviews

- IU IRB #14067
- Spring 2022
- Conducted via Zoom
- Average duration of 37 minutes

Participants

- 45% non-white
- 32% male, non-binary, or other
- 45% queer
- 32% disabled
- 52% currently working in academic libraries

Navigating normative spaces

Normative spaces: Furniture

“I had to beg, and then I had to go HR, and then go to workman’s comp people before they would get me a freaking **chair to sit at the reference desk in**. This is not okay. You buy these chairs, but for people who don’t have your body type, these are uncomfortable. **You can’t ask me to sit in this and to be okay with it**. And it was very much, “Well, no one else gets it. Why should we get it for you?” And I was just like, **maybe other people need it and just aren’t as loud as I am.**”

Normative spaces: Classrooms

“I feel like a lot of the time **I’m just in my head.**
I really don’t think anyone cares, but I’m the
one that’s thinking about this stuff.”

Bodies under surveillance

Surveillance and sexual harassment

“I’ve never had any negative comments about my size at work, but even when someone makes a positive comment about it, **it’s not comfortable. This is not what I’m here for...**When I first got my public library job, I was sixteen. I was working alone in the stacks and having people say, “You’re hot,” “You’ve got big boobs,” stuff like that – **leave me alone!**”

Surveillance and hiring

“I was asking, “What do I need to do to get into branch management? Is there training? Do I need to do anything? How can I work toward achieving this aspiration?” And the kind of answer that I got was, **“Well, you might want to look at your physicality.”** And I’m like, **that’s singularly unhelpful.”**

Surveillance and weight changes

“I really hope it’s not **because you’re sick or something**, but you look absolutely great!”

Surveillance and colleagues

“I had sat down on a chair, and it creaked. Someone was like, “**Oh, you’re going to break that chair.**” And I was just **humiliated** because this was said in front of other people, and it was **awful**. To me it felt rigid: **this is how women are supposed to look, and you’re doing it wrong by putting on weight**. You’re supposed to look *this way*, so you don’t deserve respect. You know, **if someone thin had sat on that chair, there wouldn’t have been a comment at all** because that person is **deserving of respect** because they’re doing what they’re supposed to do.”

Surveillance and supervisors

“I’ll never forget a supervisor coming in after I had gained a lot of weight, and **she tapped my belly and said, “You need to lose that!”** I said, “Yes, I do, thank you so much for that.” And you just kind of try to roll with it because **you don’t want to offend them** even though that was just as bad.”

Visible otherness

Visible otherness and reference work

“I don’t like doing reference. And the sad thing is, I love doing reference. I **love patron services, but I feel like it’s very unprofessional at this size.**”

Visible otherness and approachability

“I think that my size makes me more approachable to **other fat people**, to **other marginalized people**. I think **disabled people** feel more comfortable coming to me. I think that people who are what I term “**visibly queer**,” people who don’t necessarily pass in their queerness, **because they just see somebody else who is othered in some way**. And that, I think, can be a comforting sight.”

Visible otherness and gender

“I think there are some ways that the **really feminine presentation** coupled with the fatness puts you in this **maternal** category, and there’s some ways the **very androgynous approach** kind of puts you in sort of a **sexless, non-threatening blob person** category. It’s a very different vibe in each case, but I think it does make someone seem **more comforting** to some students a lot of the time, for them to be **visibly imperfect** in some way.”

How we create a more inclusive future

Recommendations: Accessible spaces

“I tend to bring that up under the guise of **general accessibility** rather than making it explicitly about size or fatness. Okay, well, this isn't usable for someone in a wheelchair, for someone with a mobility device – **those types of accessibility issues that I see as more sympathetic or palatable to people who aren't fat** or don't have those experiences.”

Recommendations: Avoiding body talk

“I think I have been lucky in my work life that many of my supervisors have been fat themselves, so there **isn't a lot of even acknowledgement of different body sizes** just because there's an **assumption that everybody's going to be different.**”

Recommendations: Avoiding body talk cont.

Any potential benefit of bonding with others over a shared experience related to weight loss or restrictive eating is eclipsed by the potential harm of alienating or causing distress for colleagues and users, including those in fat bodies.

Recommendations: “Workplace wellness”

“I think people with **very good hearts and very good intentions** put things forward without recognizing how they can be **directly hurtful** or how they set people up to be **bullied** by people within the organization.”

Recommendations: Conversations

“We need to have **a fat person who’s aware of fatness** design our building spaces and policies and procedures.”

Recommendations: The big question

“What do you need to feel
comfortable and confident to do
your **best public work?**”

Preview of topics in forthcoming work:

- Impression management
- Professionalism
- Generational differences
- Working with users from specific fields of study
- Interviews and hiring
- Differences between institution types
- Professional identity and stereotypes

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conversation going**

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