

# FATNESS AND THE FUTURE OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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## INTRODUCTION

In an employment landscape in which only one state protects workers from discrimination based on weight and absent of relevant federal protections, public-facing librarians in fat bodies face both broader forces of discrimination and bias, as well as unique challenges in performing their work.<sup>1</sup> As explored by Versluis, Agostino, and Cassidy, gendered notions of librarianship are often made manifest for professionals in fat bodies who are expected to inhabit the roles of both authority and caregiver when working with library users.<sup>2</sup> These barriers of discrimination, bias, and user expectations are compounded further for those who embody multiple marginalized identities.

This paper reports on findings from interviews with thirty-one librarians who engage in public-facing work, broadly described as reference, instruction, programming, and outreach, from a wide variety of institution types, including academic, archives, public, school, and special libraries. Particular attention was paid to recruiting and selecting a diverse participant pool in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, in an effort to speak with librarians who identify as members of groups that are marginalized and underrepresented on a national scale, as well as in the profession of librarianship more specifically.<sup>3</sup> This approach reflects a commitment to decentering whiteness and other dominant perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Further, this emphasis on intersectionality more precisely locates this study in conversation with recent scholarship on the experiences of librarians with other marginalized identities, including librarians of color, librarians with disabilities, and neurodivergent librarians.<sup>5</sup>

In these interviews, librarians reflected on the ways fatness affected the public-facing work that they do, their ability to do that work effectively, and their professional identities as librarians, providing meaningful insight on the ways in which library services, workspaces, and cultures perpetuate or combat weight stigma and anti-fat bias. By amplifying the voices of fat librarians in public-facing roles and highlighting their experiences, this research deepens the scholarship on the intersection of fatness and librarianship and contributes to more informed and just conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion in the library profession.

## METHODS

Volunteers for this study were recruited from professional forums and listservs relevant to public-facing library work, as well as through social media posts. The recruitment form included demographic and employment questions with the goal of identifying a participant pool which

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would be both broadly representative and intentionally diverse. Volunteers were therefore asked to identify themselves in terms of fatness (yes/no/other), gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability, as well as asked for relevant professional information, including current institution type, years worked in libraries, position title, and frequency of public-facing work.

Out of 118 volunteers, forty-four participants were selected and contacted to schedule an interviews. Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were completed in March and April 2022. As summarized in Table 1, the thirty-one participants included librarians from a variety of demographic groups and institution types.

TABLE 1							
Participant Demographics (N = 31)							
		n	%			n	%
<b>Gender</b>				<b>Current institution type</b>			
	Female	21	67.7		Academic	16	51.6
	Male	6	19.4		Public	9	29
	Non-binary	2	6.5		School	2	6.5
	Other	2	6.5		Special	3	9.7
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				Other			
	White	17	54.8	<b>Years worked in libraries</b>			
	Black (inc. biracial)	5	16.1		Less than five	6	19.4
	Other	9	29		Five to ten	10	32.4
<b>Sexual orientation</b>					Ten to twenty	7	22.6
	Straight	16	51.6		More than twenty	8	25.8
	Queer	14	45.2				
	No response	1	3.2				
<b>Ability</b>							
	Disabilities	10	32.4				
	No disabilities	19	61.3				
	No response	2	6.5				

Participants were provided with the interview questions (see appendix) at least one business day before their interview. Each participant was invited to ask the researcher to skip any questions which they did not feel comfortable answering, both in advance of and during the interview. In addition to the thirteen provided questions, the researcher asked follow-up questions when needed for clarification. The interviews could be described as informal and conversational, with the researcher often providing affirmation and validation for participants in the form of personal anecdotes of shared experiences and feelings. The researcher also frequently asked clarifying questions to understand the lived emotional experience of participants rather than making assumptions about how specific circumstances, comments, and other recollected events made them feel. Doing so was both intentional and significant due to the researcher’s positionality as a white, female, fat academic librarian whose working life and professional identity have also been affected by their size. These methods largely align with feminist qualitative interview techniques which prioritize collaboration, rapport, and caring for the well-being of participants.<sup>6</sup>

All interviews were conducted on Zoom, with one participant also providing written answers in advance of the scheduled interview, and recorded both on Zoom and with a separate audio recorder. Interviews ranged from twenty to fifty-nine minutes each, with an average duration of thirty-seven minutes, and were later transcribed

and analyzed to identify themes. When needed, quotes in this paper have been redacted to protect participant anonymity, particularly in responses that provided specific details about institutional context, geographic location, or personal attributes. Care has been taken to ensure that these redactions do not alter the meaning or content of the participant responses.

## FINDINGS

While the conversations with each librarian reflected their unique lived experiences, some notable themes emerged that reveal the extent to which fat librarians grapple with anti-fatness and weight stigma in their public-facing work.

### *Navigating Normative Spaces*

Participants frequently identified the challenges of navigating and working in library spaces built for an imagined normative body rather than the fat bodies in which they move through the world. Indeed, the physical realities of furniture and spaces built for smaller bodies were often described as barriers to librarians effectively and confidently performing public work.

Furniture, both in librarians' offices and at public service points, was often identified as a source of physical discomfort and heightened anxiety.

Well, some consultation rooms are bigger than others, so the facilities in which we're working, moving around people to sit in a chair – you know, my body's going to touch somebody somewhere...If I have a choice, I select one room where I don't have to walk around somebody or anything like that.

[My former principal] bought me the world's teeniest tiniest desk, so my size in relation to my desk is almost always on my mind. It can be physically very uncomfortable, and it's also very difficult to work with. It's not even an L, so trying to arrange it where I can fit a computer, trying to wrap my legs around things, or bumping into things...

One challenge I have, not with the public-facing stuff but with my desk, is my stomach and the keyboard – they try to occupy the same space a lot, and it makes me self-conscious to have to ask for help with that. I can't both have a place to put my feet, be in a reasonably ergonomic position, and see my computer screen. That just doesn't happen at work for me, so I'm kind of hacking together things, like bringing in my own Bluetooth devices to create some more flexibility in my space.

I had to beg, and then I had to go to 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.

As librarians described their work extending outside of the library, issues also arose in navigating other spaces in which they performed public work.

We have a coffee shop at the bottom of one library, and sometimes people are like, "Oh, let's get a coffee." And we have normal tables, and we have ones with stools, like a café table. And if that's the only table, I'm like, this is really uncomfortable.

If I'm anywhere that I'm not usually at at work, like a classroom, then I'm more of like, are my hips going to fit through here? If I need to sit down somewhere, I'm kind of just observant of chairs. So do they have arms on these chairs? Am I going to feel a little squished as I go in? 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 looking at this type of stuff.

Mainly with the teaching space, most of the rooms have plenty of room up front until you bring down the projector screen. Once you do that, the projector screen almost cuts off the teacher podium, so in order to actually get through, I have to move the projector screen aside so that I can get past any time that I want to go to the other side of the room or point out something specific on the projector. So as a result, it draws attention because every time I have to go past the podium, I have to move the screen.

One of the most frequently cited issues in navigating library space was that of shelving or retrieving books from bottom shelves. This was consistent across institution types, years of service, and other demographic factors, particularly when fat librarians were asked when they were most aware of their size in performing public work.

I'm aware of my size all the time, mostly because of associated mobility issues, you know, like when everything that you need is on the bottom shelf.

I guess I am more aware of it when you're shelving, or doing something that's very stooping, or you need to get down to the bottom shelf. I feel on display, you know? My clothes bulge, I've got to make sure my skirt's covering my bottom, things like that.

In my previous job where I was working with children and needing to get down to that lower shelf, that was awful for me as a person of size. You know, getting down on the floor usually wasn't a problem, but getting back up involves a lot of finding things to brace myself on and grunting and groaning. I actually think there were some kids who found it amusing, so they asked for help finding things that were on the bottom shelves. In my current job, we have a whole section of our shelves that is not stable, so I can't look at things on the bottom shelf because I can't grab on to the shelves to balance myself to stand up.

Any time I have to get down and mess with something in the stacks, especially if I'm having to deal with something that's on the bottom shelf, it becomes more complicated. Instead of just being able to bend over and mess with it, I usually have to get down on my knees and start messing with the books. It becomes very apparent at that point that my size is a detriment when it comes to dealing with the stacks.

When asked how their fatness informed their approach to public-facing librarianship, a number of interviewees highlighted the ways in which their negative experiences navigating physical spaces that were built for smaller bodies made them more keenly aware of accessibility issues more broadly, particularly for users.

While I don't have any mobility impairments or any of those sorts of things, I am of a size that every single chair is not going to work for me. When we're looking to buy furniture, I check weight limits on stuff. Nobody else in my organization appears to even think about that.

I need a bigger desk chair, we need different step stools. It maybe gives you a broader framework for accommodation. You know, if I have a patron who doesn't speak very well, or is not a great speller, or doesn't see very well, or hear very well, or needs me to come downstairs and do some-

thing. Having a barrier of any kind for yourself, I hope, tends to make you a more empathetic person toward other people...Hopefully it made me a little better, more willing to listen, to be more curious than certain.

It affects how I design spaces because I design them not to have the ADA minimum aisle to get a wheelchair down, but a wider aisle so two people of my size can pass without having to turn sideways and get intimate to do so. The ADA standard is a wheelchair can get down the aisle. My standard is a wheelchair can turn around in the aisle, and that gives us extra space.

Fat librarians characterized this heightened awareness of accessibility as a strength in their librarianship but also described the strategies they needed to employ in raising these issues with colleagues.

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.

## *Bodies Under Surveillance*

These interviews demonstrate that the bodies of fat librarians are under constant surveillance, as made evident by comments made by users and colleagues. Though the content of the comments described by participants ranged from sexual harassment to attire to comments on weight changes, they all served as reminders that users and colleagues were watching and evaluating the bodies of fat librarians.

In public libraries, it was definitely negative comments. I was definitely called like a fat bitch for not waiving fines or accommodating requests, just upholding policies and stuff like that. I have memories of a patron complaining that he didn't like if I, or another one of my employees who was fat, unlocked the doors in the morning because we walked too slow from one side of the building to the other.

At this institution I have had more veiled things like, "Oh I didn't know you could find clothing like that." Or, "I was really surprised that you would wear that."

I've had men catcall me before at work, and I think being overweight, we tend to have more weight in certain parts of our bodies that men find attractive or can find attractive. 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!

They asked if I was single, or if I was married, and I said, "No, I'm not." And they said I should move to Europe because Europeans like bigger women. I was pretty shocked, and then I thought it was funny, and then I was a little angry. And then when I talked through it with some friends and my sister, I could feel the hurt underneath all those layers.

A colleague once told me, "Let's take the elevator to go downstairs, I'm able-bodied and you are..." And she trailed off after she said that, but the impression was that I was heavy and may not be able to go down the stairs. It made me feel like shit.

As in other realms of public life, the surveillance of fat bodies is exacerbated for people of color, specifically women of color. One participant, a queer Black woman, spoke about users fetishizing her body, providing an example of a user telling her, “Yeah, I was thinking about that dress you wore all night.” She characterized comments such as that one as “definitely weird and inappropriate,” in comparison to other comments which she described as either “really really rude” (name-calling and slurs) or “unwanted but well-meaning” (unsolicited diet advice). Another participant, also a fat Black woman, described male users ogling her, making comments on her appearance, and leaving her their numbers as “an occupational hazard” that “comes with the territory,” advising herself and others to, “just ignore it and move on.” When asked if a user had ever commented on her size, a fat Latina librarian recalled it this way:

The few times that it has happened I’m often sexualized in my fatness from patrons. So one time I had a patron walk up to me and tell me I had a fat juicy booty. I think one other time, just getting hit on, “Big girl like you, you should have a man.” So it’s very often sexualized in terms of my fatness.

One librarian, a white woman in public libraries, recalled an experience from early in her career in which the library director delighted in greeting her in the staff kitchen each day by saying, “Wow, every time I come in here you’re stuffing your face!” The librarian, noting that she was “mouthier” at that age, would reply, “Well, I’m not supposed to eat out on the floor, but I can eat at the desk if you don’t want me to eat in the kitchen.” This example was one of many direct remarks from supervisors and colleagues described by study participants. While comments from users were more frequently and casually dismissed, participants reflected on comments from and acts of surveillance by fellow library workers in greater detail.

I had one evaluation from a supervisor maybe fifteen years ago where they commented on the clothing that I wore and that I did not dress professionally enough. I do think though that for that supervisor, my size was actually an issue. She was on vacation when I was hired, and I often wonder if she would have been in favor of my hiring because of my size.

At one point, my weight dropped pretty quickly because I was getting sick all the time. And one senior person who works in the office, we were at some sort of function, and they come up to me and go, “I really hope it’s not because you’re sick or something, but you look absolutely great!” And I was just like, “thanks,” because I felt like I couldn’t respond impolitely. Like, what if I had been?

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.

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.

Behind the scenes, it’s a lot of “I’m trying to lose five pounds,” “Are you going to do this challenge with us?,” that type of stuff. And it’s never to be negative, but in the back of my mind I’m thinking, why do you not like your body? I don’t understand. Does that mean you don’t like my body too? It’s definitely harmful.

## Visible Otherness

For fat librarians who work with the public, their fatness is a highly visible indicator of otherness, with fat librarians who also embody other historically underrepresented and marginalized identities experiencing particularly heightened visibility. Participants described the ways in which this hypervisibility complicated their relationship with the public-facing work that they otherwise enjoyed doing.

One of the reasons I never liked working on the reference desk was that being sat in the middle of a public space and being highly visible and, you know, that being part of the job. That can create a little bit of an uncomfortable awareness if you're doing that work in a fat body.

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.

Male participants reflected on the ways that their fatness affected their visibility in relation to their gender within a profession that is largely comprised of women.

I have experienced a lot of people who hear that I'm a librarian and automatically assume that I'm gay. On first meeting it's like, "Oh, you're a male librarian, you're not married – you must be gay!"... There's just this assumption that if you're a man in a typically female profession, and you're not like a PE teacher, people will start to question your cis-hood, for lack of a better term.

I know I don't fit the stereotypical librarian that most people think of, the skinny guy with the book and the glasses (I've got half of that going on, but you know), and that is soft-spoken.

I've talked to the other librarians about this, and they said that for some reason, every time they have a male librarian, more students seem to drift toward the male librarian and end up ignoring the female librarians. So it's been a weird dichotomy in that students that question my other colleagues' abilities will not question mine, but then the students that do not question them will not come to me.

For fat librarians who also embody other marginalized identities, their visibility in public-facing work is amplified. One participant described the ways in which her visibility as a fat Muslim woman who wears a scarf in a non-Muslim-majority area often made her feel ostracized both within her institution and within the profession more broadly. Describing her identity as a "triple whammy," she somberly stated, "the microaggressions – you know how hard it is living in this country when you're different." She explained her preference for one-on-one consultations over reference work at a public service desk as rooted in the ability to have more control over how she was perceived.

While participants often expressed discomfort with the visibility of public work in a fat body, many also identified the ways in which their fatness made them more approachable to users, especially those in fat bodies or with other non-normative identities.

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.

I definitely think that among other fat people, disabled people, any sort of visibly othered person, I do think I'm more approachable.

I very often get told that I look like somebody's daughter, usually people who are African American. So when it comes to answering questions and things, I feel more comfortable in my fatness because I know that they more than likely have somebody in their family who they love who looks like me.

Especially as someone who identifies as fat, I tend to feel like we are, for lack of a better term, less pretentious than others, so we're more approachable. And especially with younger folks, I think they probably tend to look at us as more friendly.

Users might consider me to be more approachable because they would be less intimidated by somebody who doesn't fit the mold. They might think that I would be less judgmental. So I have found over the years that people will come to me with their questions that they think might be weird, or if they don't want anyone else to know that they're asking that question.

One participant, a non-binary academic librarian, commented on the ways in which their fatness and gender presentation affected their approachability:

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.

While creating challenges and the potential for harm, the visible otherness of fat librarians is, as described by these participants, also an asset for libraries that seek to create a welcoming and inclusive space for a diverse community of users.

## DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The themes and topics discussed in this paper, while nowhere near a complete accounting of the more than nineteen hours spent in conversation with participants, provide meaningful insight on the experiences of fat librarians that can be used to inform our approaches to creating more inclusive libraries. Many of the following recommendations come directly from the participants themselves who have been doing and reflecting on this work in their own libraries.

As succinctly stated by one librarian, "I think there's a place for body size in talking about universal design." When designing or renovating library spaces, involving a broader range of library employees in the discussion will only yield more inclusive environments if the contributions and perspectives of those employees are heard, respected, and acted upon. In this study, participants identified the ways in which their fatness, particularly when coupled with disabilities or other factors, helped them to see and understand the many ways that library spaces and services could cause discomfort for a wide range of users. Librarians lamented when service points required users to stand for the duration of an interaction, when there was nowhere to sit and catch one's breath when traversing the stacks, or when books were commonly out of reach on top and bottom shelves. Library employees, including fat librarians, need to be empowered to raise these issues without judgement and instead in recognition of their goal of creating more inclusive library spaces for users, fellow workers, and themselves. Indeed, to effectively serve the public and do meaningful work, all librarians need to have safe and comfortable furniture and working conditions. At the very least, libraries can make their collections more accessible to all users and workers, including fat librarians, by avoiding the use of bottom shelves.

Several participants spoke of workplaces in which they felt welcomed, supported, and included as fat librarians. These libraries and institutions were markedly devoid of discussions around bodies and diets, instead focusing on accessibility and the work of librarianship. One participant described his library as having strict guidelines against discussing or commenting on anyone's body, while others described a broader disposition toward inclusion.



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.

To be certain, most participants described libraries in which discussions of bodies and intentional weight loss were common. It is important to understand that 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. One participant, a long-time library director, cautioned against the casual adoption of “wellness initiatives”:

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.

Library leaders must carefully consider the introduction or promotion of workplace wellness activities, especially those that have the potential for discrimination, even if those activities have been initiated by librarians in fat bodies. If a librarian's choice to decline participation would require them to disclose personal information or risk interpersonal conflict or isolation, then that activity is likely to cause a hostile, exclusionary workplace. This is particularly relevant for libraries with goals related to equity, diversity, and inclusion that emphasize “fostering an inclusive climate” and “improving workplace culture.”<sup>7</sup>

As these interviews demonstrate, the experiences of fat librarians are not homogenous, nor are their approaches to engaging with, responding to, and shaping the world in their fat bodies. As one participant stated, “We need to have a fat person who's aware of fatness design our building spaces and policies and procedures.” While some fat librarians may be deeply familiar with the scholarship and activism around anti-fat bias and weight stigma, others are not and therefore may not be prepared to speak, or interested in speaking, on issues of body size in libraries. Therefore, librarians and library administrators who are not in fat bodies should be careful not to make assumptions about how their fat colleagues and employees would respond to these conversations. Rather, library workers who are not in fat bodies can advocate for and meaningfully engage with their fat colleagues by familiarizing themselves with the research on anti-fat bias and listening to the fat librarians who choose to share their informed perspectives.

Beyond the implementation of best practices surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion in libraries, leaders must ask their librarians, “What do you need to feel comfortable and confident to do your best public work?” However, asking the question will not suffice. Library leaders must be prepared to listen to and understand their employees when they answer, even if the responses do not align with expectations or previous personal experiences. They must also listen even more closely when the answers are provided by librarians who embody multiple marginalized identities. Some librarians in fat bodies may need to reserve additional time before and after instruction, storytimes, or other highly visible and performative tasks. Some fat librarians are happy to sit at a public reference desk, while others do their best work in a virtual setting or one-on-one in their offices. Some may thrive in front of a group of touring undergraduate students, and others may perform more meaningful outreach with the creation of online videos or finding aids.

While this recommended discussion prompt emerges from a study of fat librarians in public-facing positions, it is relevant for all library workers, including those who may experience discrimination and barriers related to race, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, neurodiversity, and more. Indeed, the many differing ways in which librarians do their best work almost certainly align with the many differing ways in which our users prefer to engage with library services. Therefore, in asking and acting upon the responses to this question, library leaders can empower and support librarians to enact and embody their identities and expertise to build better public services. Meaningful dialogue about our work, informed by both research and our lived experience, must be followed by meaningful action to create more equitable, just, and inclusive libraries for our users and ourselves.

## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please feel welcome to review these questions in advance of our interview. If there are questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, please do not hesitate to let me know, and I will skip them.

Note: Users are defined as people using your library services, including but not limited to students, public patrons, researchers, faculty, and staff.

1. Please briefly describe the public-facing work that you do in your current position. Examples of public-facing work include but are not limited to reference, instruction, presentations, and consultations.
2. How often are you aware of your body size when performing this work, and in what ways?
3. Does your size awareness differ depending on user type, work task, or setting? How so?
4. Has a user ever commented on your fatness? Please describe this situation, including the setting and type of user.
5. Have you ever been treated differently than other library workers by a user based on your size? Please describe.
6. Have you ever been in a situation in which a user's research question or topic made you uncomfortable due to your fatness? Please describe.
7. Have you ever had a user question your expertise? To what extent do you think your fatness played a role in their assessment of your credibility?
8. Do you think that your size makes you more or less approachable to users compared to other colleagues? Please describe.
9. In what ways do you see other aspects of your identity (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, ability, race or ethnicity) as intersecting with your fatness in how you are perceived by users?
10. Has a colleague or supervisor ever commented on your body size in relation to your public-facing work?
11. How has your experience doing public-facing library work in a fat body informed your approach to librarianship?
12. To what extent does your fatness align or conflict with your professional identity as a librarian, and in what ways?

Are there any other aspects of your public-facing library work, professional identity, and fatness that you would like to discuss?

## NOTES

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