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LIS 771

Topic Paper 1

Cisgender Issues in Public Librarianship

How public librarians are failing their transgender patrons

Disclosure: I write this paper as a transgender woman. While the majority of the content of this paper will be based off and reference existing research, I will, at times, speak from my own experience and expertise. Additionally, I will not be covering basic topics and definitions of transgender people, as there is already a plethora of available research on the topic if one wishes to search for it.

When researching the topic of how public libraries can better serve transgender patrons, it is impossible to deny the seeming cyclical nature of the literature available. We are stuck at a standstill, where the same articles are being written because progress is not being made. What little literature is available largely falls into one of three main categories:

1. “Trans 101” – basic summations of what makes a person trans and very basic guidelines of how to be minimally accommodating.¹
2. “Trans information needs” – studies looking to identify transgender information needs that often focus on medical information needs.
3. “Critiques of the current available literature” – literature reviews that critique the quality and variety of the literature available on trans issues and advocate for more in-depth writing on the topic.

This paper itself will seemingly fall into the third category. However, my goal is to try to answer a different question. Why are we stuck in this cycle? What is failing to happen that causes the same articles to be repeatedly written, and how can we get out of it? The short answer is that

¹. I am borrowing this term from: Adolpho, “Decistifying Trans and Gender Diverse Inclusion in Library Work: A Literature Review – in the Library With the Lead Pipe.” as I found it to be the most concise and clear way to describe this style of paper.

there is a seeming apathy of cisgender librarians, as a whole, on meaningfully engaging with and effectively advocating for their transgender patrons.

To understand how this conclusion was drawn we must look at three areas. First, we will need to look in more detail at the current available literature and analyze the discourse surrounding serving trans patrons. We will then look at the reality of trans individuals in the United States to better understand what is at stake from this lack of attentiveness. Finally, we will synthesize what has been covered to understand the root of the problem.

Literature Review

To start, let us look at the research available on the information needs for transgender patrons. The earliest example that was available that focused only on transgender needs (and not the greater LGBTQIA+ community) dated back to 2007 with Beiriger and Jackson's research looking at the needs of their transgender patrons in Portland, Oregon.² A survey was conducted with the trans population asking about information seeking in four areas: physical health, mental health, legal information, and advocacy/political information. When asked to rank differing sources of information such as a public library, the library did not rank higher than 5th out of 10 on any of the survey fields with no questions asking what limits library use.³

Another larger scale version of this survey was also conducted in 2017 by Drake and Bielefield where the participants were recruited via social media and conferences in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The survey questions were expanded to include information on both general and trans-specific information seeking in regards to physical health and mental health, while also adding a section for "general or other info about trans issues" and spiritual information.⁴ When asked, only 28% of participants used the library for any kind of transgender related research.

² . Beiriger and Jackson, "An Assessment of the Information Needs of Transgender Communities in Portland, Oregon."

³ . *ibid.*, 53.

⁴ . Drake and Bielefield, "Equitable Access: Information Seeking Behavior, Information Needs, and Necessary Library Accommodations for Transgender Patrons", 161-163.

Both surveys conclude by recommending further collection development, unfiltered internet access, and more inclusive library policies.^{5,6,7}

What is most striking about these two studies is how their conclusions are more or less exactly the same, despite being written 10 years apart. This indicates a stagnation in tangible progress for services to the transgender community. The recommendations provided by these two studies often show up in other literature available on the topic, largely in the “Trans 101” style of papers.⁸

Adolpho and Krueger performed a literature review in 2024 that looked at what writing was available across many different types of librarianship: Public, Academic, Archives, and Cataloguing. They found that:

“Aside from examples in archives and cataloging, library literature has seldom strayed beyond trans 101 content.”⁹

Additionally, Cristalan Ness in a 2023 article, heavily scrutinizes the redundancy of the literature and posits that it is partially due to a conflation of LGB issues without consideration for trans issues:

“Trans people have not benefited from the years of advocacy on the part of information professionals to make the profession more inclusive of gay, lesbian and bi people, and much of the research in the field has ‘lumped in’ trans into LGBT, making it difficult to determine how user needs differ across this spectrum.”¹⁰

They also propose that this is rooted in a history of treating trans people as the “other” and by upholding this cycle, this dominant discourse, trans people have been made into an “invisible minority.”¹¹

⁵. Beiriger and Jackson, “An Assessment of the Information Needs of Transgender Communities in Portland, Oregon”, 57-59.

⁶. Drake and Bielefield, “Equitable Access: Information Seeking Behavior, Information Needs, and Necessary Library Accommodations for Transgender Patrons”, 166-167.

⁷. More inclusive library policies include: gender neutral or all gender bathrooms that patrons do not need to request a key to, not requiring gender on the forms to sign up for a library card, the ability to choose the name on your library card without a legal name change, training staff to not use gendered honorifics (sir, mam, miss, mister, etc), and updating the controlled language used in the catalogue to better reflect how trans patrons refer to themselves.

⁸. For examples of these styles of papers please see: Villagran and Long, “Barriers to Trans* Service and Outreach in Public Libraries” and Jardine, “Inclusive Information for Trans* Persons.”

⁹. Adolpho, “Decistifying Trans and Gender Diverse Inclusion in Library Work: A Literature Review – in the Library With the Lead Pipe.”

¹⁰. Ness, “Dismantling Structural and Individual Cisgenderism in Illinois Libraries: A Descriptive Research Study on Cisnormativity, Transprejudice and Biases Against Transgender and Nonbinary Populations”, 117.

¹¹. Ibid, 114.

This obfuscation goes even further when you look at reports about “gender diverse programming.” For instance, in an article by Naidoo looking at Drag Queen Storytime and “Gender Creative” programming.¹² In this article, Naidoo notes that when picking out stories for this, supposedly, gender expansive programming, only 15% of librarians chose books talking about trans children, while the vast majority librarians chose books that were about “gender non-conforming characters”¹³ or books about not fitting in.¹⁴ Naidoo goes on to use a quote from Chelsea Condren, a librarian at the New York Public Library, which talks about the lack of LGBTQ children’s books. However, all the books mentioned are LGB focused and have nothing to do with trans people.^{15,16} There are some brief mentions about programs being run by trans advocacy groups, but the real problem here lies in the two being lumped together to begin with.

It baffles me that it needs to be said but being trans/nb/gnc is not analogous to drag. Drag is a performance that is rooted in political resistance and is commentary on gender and gender roles. While it has served as a safe haven for trans people in the past (and still does to a certain extent), that was never its primary function. It is a performance for entertainment. This conflation is a dangerous one. Drag performers are doing just that, performing a gender for an audience who is in on the “joke”, as it were, as opposed to trans/nb/gnc people who are simply a different gender than they were assigned at birth trying to live their lives. This *conflation* is partially why it often has to be said: trans women are women, trans men are men.

It is also a difference of community, as drag is really a product of the LGB community, because, while there are some drag performers who may identify as trans/nb/gnc, there are also many who identify as cisgender. This may be what would seemingly make drag a more palatable program to cisgender librarians (as opposed to the briefly mentioned trans focused programs) because of the “years of advocacy ...to make the profession more inclusive of gay, lesbian and bi people.”¹⁷

¹² Naidoo, “A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries.”

¹³ Of note here is that one of the stories marked as being “gender non-conforming” is really only so in the most technical of senses. The story in question is Worm Loves Worm. While yes, they both wear parts of a dress, this is largely due to social pressure and misunderstanding, which is less about gender expression and more about societal gender roles. The issues at hand are rooted in heteronormativity, thus not really making it about gender.

¹⁴ Naidoo, “A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries.”

¹⁵ Naidoo, “A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries”, 18.

¹⁶ Specifically Worm Loves Worm, And Tango Makes Three, A is for Activist, and King and King. One could make an argument for Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress, but not mentioning at least I Am Jazz feels telling.

¹⁷ Ness, “Dismantling Structural and Individual Cisgenderism in Illinois Libraries: A Descriptive Research Study on Cisnormativity, Transprejudice and Biases Against Transgender and Nonbinary Populations”, 117.

Ultimately, the review of the literature found three primary issues:

1. There is notable stagnation in what is being written about regarding trans people in librarianship, largely due to a lack of implementing previous recommendations.
2. There is a notable othering, by making trans people into an outside group, the literature has presented them as an invisible, unknowable, minority.
3. There is a conflation of sexual minority issues (LGB) and gender minority issues (T) in part due to the work laid out to make sexual minorities more palpable to the library community.

What Is at Stake?

“No, I did not[use the library] because I was afraid to...[I dealt with] ignorance of LGBTQ identities, ignorance of resources, [and staff with] clear distaste in dealing with me and my questions.”¹⁸

The above quote from the Drake survey feels rather salient to the issues at hand here. The fact of the matter is that, tragically, it is not safe to be openly transgender in this country.

“One in ten trans* individuals have been evicted from their home due to gender identity...”¹⁹

“59% ... reported that in the past year they had either sometimes (48%) or always (11%) avoided using a restroom, such as in public, at work, or at school, because they were afraid of confrontations or other problems.”²⁰

“nearly one-quarter (23%) ... reported that they did not seek the health care they needed ... due to fear of being mistreated as a transgender person, and 33% did not go to a health care provider when needed because they could not afford it.”²¹

“nearly one-third (29%) ... were living in poverty, more than twice the rate in the U.S. population (12%).”²²

Some of these statistics may seem familiar, but I want you to take a look at them and imagine, for a moment, that they applied to you. As much as I would love to come and write about the joy that is found in being trans, when it comes to interacting with the public, fear plays a massive

¹⁸. Drake and Bielefield, “Equitable Access: Information Seeking Behavior, Information Needs, and Necessary Library Accommodations for Transgender Patrons.”

¹⁹. Villagran and Long, “Barriers to Trans* Service and Outreach in Public Libraries.”

²⁰. James et al., “The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey.”

²¹. Ibid.

²². Ibid.

role in what we can and can't do. On the other side of the Transgender Day of Visibility, there is the Transgender Day of Remembrance, where we remember those who were murdered, simply for being trans. If you ever need a sobering experience, just scroll through [this list](#).²³ Is it really any wonder why trans people are 3 to 4 times more likely to struggle with suicidal ideation when compared to their cisgender peers?²⁴ Is it any wonder why *trans people are afraid of coming to the library* when libraries have been *so resistant to change over the past 20 years*?

Cisgender Issues

I had previously discussed a 2023 article by Cristalan Ness but not the nature of it. It was a study that conducted a survey to gauge the bias and inclusion efforts in Illinois libraries,⁷ and the results were rather damning. Around half (49.4%) said they do not believe that there is a difference between the needs of trans and cis patrons, despite 84.9% responding that they believe that they provide fair and equitable services to trans patrons.²⁵ Less than a third (28%) were aware of local resources for trans people.²⁶ 55.3% reported that they assume people's pronouns without asking with only 20.73% regularly using gender neutral language.²⁷

These statistics indicate that while public librarians *feel* like they are being inclusive, they either fundamentally don't understand what that would take *or* they are resistant to tackling the 'harder' tasks, like addressing how they talk. In an article about academic libraries, Wagner and Crowley state the following:

“ ‘organizations that purport to represent [queer persons] best interests’ are consistent ‘centers of racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist violence’ which use inclusion or the false promise of it as a ‘tool of regulation.’”²⁸

²³ . <https://glaad.org/tdor-memoriam/>

²⁴ . Kirakosian et al., “Suicidal Ideation Disparities Among Transgender and Gender Diverse Compared to Cisgender Community Health Patients.”

²⁵ . Ness, “Dismantling Structural and Individual Cisgenderism in Illinois Libraries: A Descriptive Research Study on Cisnormativity, Transprejudice and Biases Against Transgender and Nonbinary Populations”, 122

²⁶ . Ibid.

²⁷ . Ibid, 123.

²⁸ . Wagner and Crowley, “Why Are Bathrooms Inclusive If the Stacks Exclude?”, 162.

After looking at the perceptions and biases presented in the Ness article, this rings truer than it should. Often what few actions have been taken read as performative and just ever so slightly meeting the bare minimum. It's all very well meaning but does little to materially affect the reality of the communities they purport to serve. The real kicker that bears repeating is that: the changes that need to be made for libraries to actually be more inclusive for trans individuals have been known for almost 20 years now. That is only if you want to be generous and consider the Beiriger study as the genesis point of when 'how to serve trans patrons' became known. I'm not totally unempathetic. The political climate is fraught, libraries do need to serve a variety of communities, and the march of progress is slow. However, as that march slowly makes its way towards basic dignity, people are dying and will continue to die. Book displays are nice, equality stickers are *nice*, but they do not truly shift the paradigm.

Too often, when talking about how to serve the trans community, it is framed as 'trans issues'. When, in reality, the issues do not lie with the trans community, they lie with the unwillingness of cis librarians to actively seek how to best serve their trans community members. It's not that you do not have any trans people in your community, it's that you have created an environment where they do not see you as a safe option.

At the risk of suggesting even more tasks that constitute the bare minimum, here are some suggestions:

- Make booklists and resource lists and put them up on the library website. This allows for safe, anonymous access to needed information.
- Keep in mind that not all trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people choose to medically transition in any sort of way. We must shed the idea that the be-all, end-all is medical information and name change information.
- With the previous point in mind, given the higher poverty and unemployment rates for trans people, find and most importantly vet trans-friendly organizations for food assistance, housing assistance, and mutual aid to include in your resource lists.
- Actively seek programming that is *for* trans people as opposed to simply *about* trans people. An example of a time-honored tradition in the trans community: a clothing swap. Getting clothes to change your gender presentation is an expensive endeavor. So providing a venue where people can bring their clean clothes that no longer suit

them and exchange them for clothes that others no longer need that suits them better is a fun, joyous activity that would be sure to delight your trans patrons.

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