We Already Know (Better): Private Thoughts, C/overt Harm, and a Call to Center Beneficence in Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

As direct actions and corresponding documentation of the brisk desertion of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) values and activities continue within the United States academic landscape, troubling ideas linking EDI efforts to invasions of privacy are attempting to be seeded in the LIS field. However, lived experiences of historically ignored and racialized library workers who have been harmed in library workplaces reveal that resistance to authentic acceptance and integration of EDI have long been made known by the dominant membership of the field through both unconscious and deliberate responses to EDI at all levels of development, and even during its absence—from the simple presence of BIPOC librarians to the funding of recruitment and retention programs. Recognizing that c/overt EDI resistance both intensifies harm and reveals a willingness to turn away from interrupting harm, I explore parallels between EDI and beneficence, posit EDI resistance and thought privacy rhetoric as proxy resistance to difficult knowledge, share narrative data revealing BIPOC library workers' observations of long-standing industrial ambivalence and resistance to EDI, and call for the practice of beneficence—already recognized by and intentionally practiced in professions centered on helping individuals not only survive, but thrive, by reducing known harms and recognizing and mitigating harms as they arise during research, inquiry, and practice.

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> *"I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do."*
> – James Baldwin

In her article on asserting that DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) trainings violate *thought privacy*, Antelman broadly defines the term as "an instinctively understood concept because everyone experiences it every day . . ." and attempts to connect the idea to Boire's explanation of cognitive liberty, which includes that ". . . each person is free to direct one's own consciousness; one's own underlying mental processes, and one's beliefs, opinions, and worldviews" (Antelman 2025, Boire 2000/1999). I am struck both by the author's circuitous former definition, as well as the oversight that Boire's perspective in use as intended when it

comes to EDI trainings. While EDI trainings are multi-faceted, they generally include cultivating liberative spaces for people to 1) explore and recognize their own experiences, beliefs, opinions, and worldviews while considering the same of others who have been systemically harmed through suppression and silence and 2) share experiences of challenge and pathways to reconciliation, belonging, and care. Antelman's surface discussions of cultural competence and humility inadvertently reveal that it is not privacy of thought encroachment that stymies deeper support and implementation of EDI—it is silent resistance to acknowledging harmful experiences faced by suppressed identities; ambivalence to interrupting harm done to colleagues who have been harmed by exclusion, abuse, and/or EDI pushback; and arrogance in the perception that EDI resistance is only observable through the (purportedly intrusive) request of one's thoughts on these matters.

My 2017 study on low-morale experiences in academic librarians revealed the experience as one resulting from repeated and protracted exposure to abuse and neglect at work, along with factors and systems that influence the experience (Kendrick 2017). Although pointedly not by design (but certainly a reflection of the LIS workforce), most of the participants were White, and this prompted me to conduct a second study for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) academic library workers. I wanted to know if and how the low-morale experience definition held for BIPOC, and if any differentials would surface. The qualitative data from interviews was analyzed using rigorous social science methodologies and ultimately revealed experiences of abuse and neglect along with additional impact factors that support and/or obfuscate the impacts of workplace harm (Kendrick & Damasco 2019).

Across deep interviews with BIPOC participants, 67 statements revealed the role of *diversity rhetoric* as an enabling system of low-morale experiences. These statements highlight and reify a truth that chills Antelman's assertion on DEI and thought privacy: unrequested or not, many library workers' private thoughts on EDI were always on display. The context of experiential harm in which these statements were shared also positions those who view EDI as an intrusion of private thought as unempathetic, intellectually unnuanced, and disingenuous by default ("Open Letter to CRL from the academic wing of #CripLib" 2025). Furthermore, the argument of thought privacy—and *diversity rhetoric* data—surfaces beneficence as an urgently needed value and practice at this critical time in the library and information science (LIS) profession.

Defining Beneficence

Beneficence is an established principle in practitioner-led health and science industries. Even though LIS is a promoted as a science and a practice, many LIS practitioners may not be aware of beneficence unless they are engaged in formal human subjects research. HSR projects require intensive training covering federal regulations and institutional policies and procedures for humane treatment of research participants. *The Belmont Report*, drafted in 1978 by the Office for Human Subject Research Protections and published in 1979 in response to war crimes, morally abject research studies, and/or associated inhumane treatment of targeted participants and people during World War II and after, highlights beneficence as one of three ethical principles, noting:

> Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being . . . Two general rules have been formulated as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in

this sense: (1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harm.

These complementary rules move practitioners and researchers beyond their obligations of helpful service and research and into a responsibility to be generous with the full bounty of results that improve people's lives—and to be aware of *and* intervene when unanticipated harm that comes from associated actions and inquiries arise.

Beneficence and EDI

An overview of the goals of beneficence and EDI surface symbiotic aims focused on recognizing, reducing, or interrupting harm and reveals how the LIS industry has used EDI to focus on *ideas* about helping suppressed colleagues and communities instead of requiring *accountable actions* that interrupt historic and contemporary harms the industry has done to these groups.

Within the parameters of beneficence, there are clear alignments with the goals of EDI. Historically, EDI programs were created and refined to acknowledge, correct, and prevent long-standing race and gender-based inequities borne of *de jure* and *de facto* political, economic, and social exclusion. Affirmative action, which began before *The Belmont Report*, is the most recognized effort, which in turn ushered in other programs at municipal, government, industrial, and organizational levels.

As EDI initiatives expanded into areas of accessibility and social justice, the second rule of beneficence also took root. Through grassroots work, critical race theory, and other areas of inquiry, reflection, and practice, EDI was improved through an increased awareness of harm done while engaging in EDI work. White privilege, intersectionality, and microaggressions are a few concepts/events that are now formally or experientially acknowledged as harmful and shared as points of awareness for intervention and mitigation within improved EDI practices (McIntosh 1989, Crenshaw 1991, Sue et al. 2007).

The LIS field generally joined these efforts, particularly in areas of BIPOC recruitment and retention. In addition to creating affinity caucus and divisions, the American Library Association (ALA) commissioned EDI-focused committees, created offices, and funded scholarship programs to increase and track recruitment and retention of BIPOC workers to the LIS workforce. However, even these efforts reveal private-public thoughts of librarians who saw harm and still felt resistance to intervene. In a retrospective narrative of her role in creating the Spectrum Scholarship, former ALA Executive Director Elizabeth Martinez wrote:

> One of my personal concerns was how to increase the number of librarians of color in the profession. For over 20 years, it had been claimed that diversity was a priority of ALA, yet no major program addressed this responsibility. I had hoped that adding diversity as one of the principles of ALA Goal 2000 would ignite conversation and bring forth solutions, but that did not happen.

Martinez recognized how other professions were already making progress on this—with a nod to recognizing harms of *not* supporting EDI (it is not lost on the author that these same professions are already aware of the beneficence principle):

> Other professions, such as medicine, nursing, and teaching were already making visible strides in increasing the number of non-white professionals. These professions emphasized the potential for better service, including improving communications with diverse communities. They had progressed from talking about the problem to funding recruitment.

Martinez shared her recognition of librarian resistance through claims of lack of funding, repetitive requests for additional information, and general stalling. She described the increasingly caustic responses from ALA Council members and highlighted how Past ALA President Betty Turock summarily moved the group to approve the program:

> In my opinion, it was Past-President Betty Turock's speech that settled the issue after hours of debate. She shamed her colleagues and friends into approval, reminding them of their hypocritical statements. Because of long-standing respect for her, and her history at the organization's governance level, she was likely the only one who could have forced them to agree.

Martin's narrative also surfaces librarians' resistance to *difficult knowledge*—truths that threatened their perception of the field, its purported values, and the gap between their stated and applied desire to support EDI in LIS. Exposure to difficult knowledge can create a "war within" as people grapple with their original views and determine if/how to integrate validated information from expanded narratives of harmed people and groups (Britzman 1998). Difficult knowledge also reveals a privilege to ignore harm and determine whose experiences of harm and indignity matter as they are compared with originally held worldviews.

Through the lens of beneficence, how might those colleagues have responded to the idea, funding, and implementation of Spectrum? What responsibility and role could those colleagues have played if they were practicing beneficence? What message is sent to potential or current colleagues about LIS's commitment to and accountability for realizing belonging, representation, and advancement in the field? Since beneficence is predicated on promoting others' well-being, as well as benefit maximization and harm reduction, one area of increased certainty is the decentering of one's private thoughts, particularly in the realm of ethical librarianship practice.

Silent Screams, Superficial Support, and Singling Out

Since the founding of the Spectrum Scholarship and the development of other LIS recruitment and retention efforts, librarians' purportedly private thoughts about EDI continue to surface as a result of c/overt harm. Narratives of experiences are the primary revealer of harm and how it is exacted on those who face it. Sharing these experiences offers opportunities for people to cultivate empathy for suffering, to reflect on ways they can be aware of their role in harm, and to consider how they can reduce the creation of harm or intervene when they witness harm.

Following are statements supporting the Diversity Rhetoric enabling system, shared in 2019 during interviews conducted with BIPOC academic librarians while discussing their experiences of workplace abuse and neglect. These statements were connected to participant observations of their colleagues' responses to EDI efforts and implementation, associated labor and values work, and political ideologies and structures that have caused historic and ongoing harm.

EDI Pushback

"[A white woman] said that she felt that she was being ignored with all this talk about diversity. So, there's a resistance to it. Against having the discussion here." – Multi-racial study participant

"[The current structure] . . . keeps people of color out of certain positions. And that reminds me that when we have these initiatives like diversity and things like that, we have White people determining what diversity should look like." – African American study participant

"And [the diversity committee]—we feel like we have to be more careful now with our director as to what to bring up to her. Because she has gotten some pushback from some of our White colleagues about how much she listens to the librarians of color." – Asian American study participant

Superficiality

"These women are very liberal—as soon as 45 was elected, they're wearing their safety pins and I thought, 'that's hilarious, they're wearing their safety pins to show that they're safe people to talk to,' yet in their circles, they're all-White circles . . . I think they think that they're 'woke,' so-to-speak, but I don't think they really are." – Hispanic study participant

"Mostly—all of the leadership is White. And I think, on the surface, they put out statements that say they are about things like dismantling White supremacy. So, they know the vocabulary, but then I wonder if they fully understand what it means." – Asian American study participant

Tokenizing and Paternalism

"I felt like I was told by [an administrator] to help this person because I was perceived as a person of color, as Asian American—to help this person. Because I think there was probably some perception that Asian Americans are docile and subservient." – Asian American study participant

"They were just like, 'oh, there's these three Brown people. They're new, so we'll just shuffle them . . . and coach them through this process' without accounting for the fact that two of us had already been working in libraries, so I didn't need a crash course." – African American study participant

These statements of BIPOC librarian experience showcase library workers' roles in perpetuating practical cognitive dissonance and engaging in implicit and explicit harm surrounding their (lack of) involvement with EDI initiatives, through:

- eschewing or avoiding DEI labor and service by burdening vulnerable BIPOC colleagues with the work;
- insulting the intelligence of BIPOC colleagues by engaging in false promotion of DEI; and
- discounting DEI work through surface acts that impede or regress DEI efforts or that posit DEI research as academically unsound or less rigorous.

Impacts of Covert Harm

The cognitive dissonance of being harmed by colleagues and organizations that are superficially promoting EDI—of understanding implicitly that these superficialities reveal their colleagues' *private thoughts* during their daily work—intensify the impacts of emotional, verbal/written, and systemic abuse and neglect and cause real and long-lasting harm to BIPOC library workers. These impacts interrupt the realization of goals that the LIS field touts as priorities for a robust and relevant industry. Moreover, these interruptions invoke harm on non-BIPOC library workers through deteriorating communication styles, negative workplace behaviors, and dysfunctional organization and industry norms and expectations (Freedman 2012, Freedman and Vreven 2016, Kendrick 2017, Ettarh 2018, Berg, Galvan & Tewell 2018).

Physical and Mental Health

BIPOC library workers dealing with diversity rhetoric experience report decreased physical and mental health. Additionally, they deal with two significant factors of internally motivated emotional labor resulting from the external harm and c/overt workplace exclusion they encounter:

- Stereotype threat—feelings that motivate marginalized identities to feel like they must distance themselves from negative stereotypes connected to their race, ethnicity, or culture. Workaholism, vocational awe, and unhealthy resilience behaviors are connected to this state.
- Deauthentication—minimization of personality, natural emotions, self-image, language, or ethnic or cultural heritage to avoid interrogation, retaliation, and shaming in hostile or unwelcoming workplaces.

Depression and anxiety are other commonly reported mental health outcomes, along with decreased sleep quality, fatigue, and body aches (Kendrick & Damasco 2019).

Stagnant BIPOC Recruitment/Retention

Despite recruitment efforts, along with retention programs to support BIPOC librarian persistence in the field, the field remains overwhelmingly White (88%) (ALA 2012). Currently we are observing numerous academic institutions abjectly abandon their already tenuous EDI efforts only a few years after announcing diversity statements and sharing links to carefully crafted and curated LibGuides about Black Lives Matter. What do these acts of abandonment signal to BIPOC who were considering the field? And what of the intensified harm and moral injury exacted upon current BIPOC library workers? How will these wounds

impact others? How can beneficence help library workers and organizations ensure a sense of safety and belonging and aid in recovery from these very public impacts of supposedly private thoughts?

Beneficence as Value and Practice

Library workers often share that they joined the field to "help people," however, the beneficence principle reveals that this desire is not enough when it comes to engaging with or serving excluded or harmed individuals and groups. Vocational awe and burnout reveal that the nebulous desire to help negatively impacts library workers *and* library users as they grapple with workplace harm, persistent outdated stereotypes, collegial ambivalence from teaching faculty, swiftly evolving industrial disruptions, and an expanding erosion of public distrust in higher education.

Already Bound to Beneficence

While not specifically named in LIS ethics and values documents, there are hints that both eschew the centering of private thoughts and signal beneficence in library practice. ALA Code of Ethics Principles remind practitioners not to center private interests at the expense of co-workers and to be mindful of the line between personal convictions and professional duties—which often include working with a variety of populations and identities for collaborative scholarship and service, community outreach, student engagement, and student success. ALA's Core Value of Equity also implies both the goals of EDI *and* beneficence ("actively working to dismantle barriers and create spaces that are accessible, welcoming and beneficial for all" . . . "accomplished by recognizing and addressing systemic barriers and biases . . . where everyone can benefit from the library's offerings and services.") (2024)

Rejecting notions that unevenly leverage privacy of thought ideology to justify (the privilege of) turning away from others' experience of harm and exclusion, I call on library workers to stay in the morally courageous and empathetic space of bearing witness, sharing vulnerability, and responding to/intervening in harm when it presents as expected—or when it is revealed unexpectedly, as it is wont to do while engaging in the humane work of community-building, equity, social justice, and reconciliation.

Considerations for Intentional Beneficence Practice

At a time when empathy, compassion, and hope are being vilified and/or feel akin to toxic positivity, it holds that librarianship, when practiced authentically, is humane at its core. With that humanity comes fallibility, and through practice, librarians are obligated to acknowledge challenges and seek consistent improvement to benefit the most people—while minimizing harm. To that end, there are as many entry points to beneficence as there are people who can call forth their own experiences of harm. With reflection, one can begin anew to recognize, anticipate, and intervene to increase points of protection and benefits and/or deflect and reduce harm. General areas of beginning or renewed commitment include:

- Seeking HSR education to become acquainted with the role of beneficence in applied inquiry and practice. Many academic institutions offer HSR education and certification through their research compliance or grant coordination offices;
- Being transparent about the limits of library work, the harm those limits may present, and sharing information that could reduce this harm or advocating on

behalf of vulnerable populations to appropriate parties with the power to reduce harm;

- Considering both the hopeful and unintended outcomes of policies, programs, and services—including the impacts on library workers at all levels (not just primary or secondary library users);

- Acknowledging past dysfunctional behaviors and intervening in current dysfunctional behaviors that shape, expand, perpetuate, and hide trauma between library workers;

- Strengthening psychological safety and collective care strategies for library workers so they can maintain a sense of well-being that supports them through the challenges of industry disruption, organizational change, reduced workplace safety, understaffing, and burnout; and

- Making space for intentional reflection and responsive updating of policies, processes, and workflows that reveal (incremental) progress and ongoing learning, and which reduce or remove identified barriers revealed by lived experiences of harm.

Conclusion

Librarians will always be moored to the decisions of their broader institutions or municipalities; however, we are still called to consider the ethics of librarianship and people in the communities where we engage. These communities include library workers who have been harmed explicitly and implicitly by their co-workers via subversion of EDI efforts. Enabling systems of workplace harm reveal that when it comes to EDI, the claim of thought privacy disappears when met with the observed material and intangible devastating outcomes of its lack of integrative implementation in higher education landscapes. With or without formal EDI training programs, the internal thoughts of many colleagues have been revealed via actions of exclusion, c/overt resistance, superficial engagement, and swift values regression upon the slightest presence of de-centering, emotional discomfort, or bureaucratic pressure.

Beneficence is a core practice of trusted professions and is one that is implicitly acknowledged in LIS. Repositioning EDI as an affront to intellectual freedom and thought privacy is an attempt to reestablish libraries and librarianship as neutral sites of engagement, and this regressive positioning acts as a gateway, allowing harm and suffering to be ignored, persist, and expand. Moreover, this position asserts that library workers should remain in a state of playing pretend: some workers continuing to announce that they care but never doing so authentically, other workers signaling through c/overt actions their desire to distance themselves from bearing witness to or reconciling harm while thinking no one can see their lack of care, and harmed library workers must pretend they don't see or feel the lack of care while suffering from these inauthentic and c/overt acts and public-private thoughts. To be a truly helpful profession requires facing and naming what is true and honoring experiences that reveal where librarians can improve, rather than attempting to leverage professional values to hide our industrial shortcomings. Beneficence offers a way to face these truths and move us in action toward instilling and reinforcing a sense of safety; ensuring the dignity, belonging, and care found in people-centered workplaces and communities; and centering applied humaneness in the face of established, ongoing, and potential harm.

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