

# Existing on Erasure's Edge: BIPOC Treatment in Peer Review

**V. Dozier**

*University of San Diego (San Diego, CA)*

**Amanda M. Leftwich**

*Montgomery County Community College (Blue Bell, PA)*

**ABSTRACT:** The authors of this research are Black women employed in higher education academic libraries with expectations to actively participate in the scholarly community as researchers, writers, presenters, reviewers, and editors. After multiple personal and observed experiences receiving thinly veiled and outright biased feedback from reviewers and editors in supposedly anonymous review processes, the authors decided to channel our frustration into an exploratory study that surveys if our experiences are shared amongst the BIPOC library and information studies (LIS) scholarly community. This study explores how implicit and explicit bias impacts BIPOC scholars in LIS from writers' perspectives. While this study purposefully centers on BIPOC writers' experiences, the surveyed participant pool includes people of White and/or European descent to infer how bias impacts decision-making (e.g., accept, reject, revise, and resubmit) and the feedback BIPOC writers experience throughout navigating the LIS peer review process. The peer review process was clearly marked with unnecessary hassles, including time constraints, transactional reviews, and bias. Although the time constraints and transactional reviews did not stop scholars from resubmitting to other journals, those experiences have made them reflect on the processes journals take before submission. Alternatively, negative interactions rooted in racial and gender bias made those scholars question submission to another peer-review publication perpetually.

**Keywords:** peer review, scholarly publishing, BIPOC scholars, library and information science



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 9 (2023) pp.200-223. Published 29 November 2023.

## Introduction

Peer review is the system by which publication editors and expert reviewers critique and edit authors' scholarly deliverables—often written manuscripts—for publication in scholarly and practitioner publications. Academic journal platform *Scholastica* acknowledges, “The use of peer review to evaluate scholarly manuscripts is a pillar of journal publishing across research disciplines” (2021, para. 1). The peer review process is a massive, multipronged gear in academia's scholarly publishing machine. It is practically unavoidable for those seeking to advance in higher education's existing rank and tenure hierarchies. Roh (2022) summarizes from multiple studies that “peer review is subject to systemic and individual bias across multiple genres and forms that undermines the legitimacy of the process” (2022, p. 100). North American scholarly publishing, like academia, historically prioritizes a Western, White, cisgender, male point-of-view, which can create challenges and barriers for Black, Indigenous, and persons of color (BIPOC) scholars, especially those who center issues, methodologies, and populations considered inferior to historically dominant—read, White male—voices in the academy or Ivory Tower. “The positioning of whiteness as the norm of measurement in the United States has legitimized it in such a way that it is taken for granted and is naturalized to the point of being invisible” (Purwar, 2004, as cited in Harley, 2008). Publication editors and peer reviewer pools often reflect the historically dominant voice, as connections and networking can be just as advantageous to acquiring editorial or reviewer roles as subject-matter expertise. A 2023 Ithaka S+R report asserts that the majority of librarians identify as white, and the racial and ethnic demographics of the LIS field have changed little over the past decade (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023, p. 7). Thus, the peer review process can perpetuate inequitable gatekeeping, bias, and oppressive practices by using established power structures and anonymity—in the case of blind or double-blind peer review<sup>1</sup>—to avoid accountability.

The authors of this research are BIPOC, specifically Black women, employed in higher education academic libraries with expectations to actively participate in the scholarly community as researchers, writers, presenters, reviewers, and editors. After multiple personal and observed experiences receiving thinly veiled and outright biased feedback from reviewers and editors in supposedly anonymous review processes, the authors decided to channel our frustration into an exploratory study that queries if our experiences are shared amongst the BIPOC library and information studies (LIS) scholarly community. This study explores how implicit and explicit bias impacts BIPOC scholars in LIS from both the writers' and reviewers<sup>2</sup> perspectives. While this study purposefully centers BIPOC experiences, the participant pool includes people of White and/or European descent to infer how bias impacts decision making (e.g., accept, reject, revise, and resubmit) and the feedback BIPOC writers experience throughout navigating the LIS peer review process.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge that while frequently used and recognized, *blind* and *double blind*, are ableist terms. We apologize for harm caused by the use of those terms in our survey. Henceforth, we will use *anonymous* or *identity-hidden* in their place, as *anonymous* or *identity-hidden review* represents more equitable, fair language and accurately describes the situation. See Ades, R. (2020, February 2). An End to “Blind Review.” *Blog of the APA*. <https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/02/20/an-end-to-blind-review/>; Rodas, J. M. (2009). On Blindness. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 3(2), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jlc.0.0013>

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of our study, *reviewer* encompasses both editorial and reviewer roles, unless a respondent's comment explicitly discusses editor responsibilities.

## Literature Review

### Peer Review in LIS

In 2022, Borchardt et. al. published a study exploring—among other things—if academic library journals actually demonstrate a commitment to espoused library professional values of “openness, inclusion, and equity” (2022, sec. “In Brief”). Their literature review identified a few common themes: bibliometrics, research content analysis, and journal prestige. These studies do not discuss how LIS scholars navigate the research process but instead how LIS scholars use our skills to analyze existing literature. Their own study finds that overall, “many of the [LIS] journals we examined have open access policies and practices but fall short in providing for accessibility and ensuring EDI in their publication processes” (Borchardt et al., 2022, sec. “In Brief”). We approached this literature review with this overarching question: what does LIS scholarship say about LIS publication experiences, particularly those related to LIS scholars of marginalized identities? What we discovered can be organized into three major themes: peer review frameworks and practice, marginalization, and bias in peer review.

### Peer Review Frameworks and Practices

Peer review in LIS follows a similar construct as other social and behavioral sciences, which is often essential for higher-education tenure and promotion efforts. Scholars discuss this as a component of the three primary criteria of academic librarianship: professional practice, scholarly or creative work, and service (Black & Leysen, 1994; Sapon-White et al., 2004). Unfortunately, these studies also show that academic librarians often enter the profession without much scholarly writing experience or time to pursue professional development in research or grant writing skills due to the nature of our work and graduate programs (Black & Leysen, 1994; Sapon-White et al., 2004). Despite some studies discussing writing groups and mentorship, academic librarians are primarily on their own to navigate the scholarly writing process. As articulated in the [Wiley flowchart below](#) (See **Figure 1**), the peer review steps are generally:

- Potential authors upload a manuscript to a publisher’s portal.
- Editors initially determine the appropriateness of the publication’s aim and scope. (1st decision)
- If appropriate, the editor solicits reviewers for peer-reviewed content and negotiates deadlines for reviewer feedback.

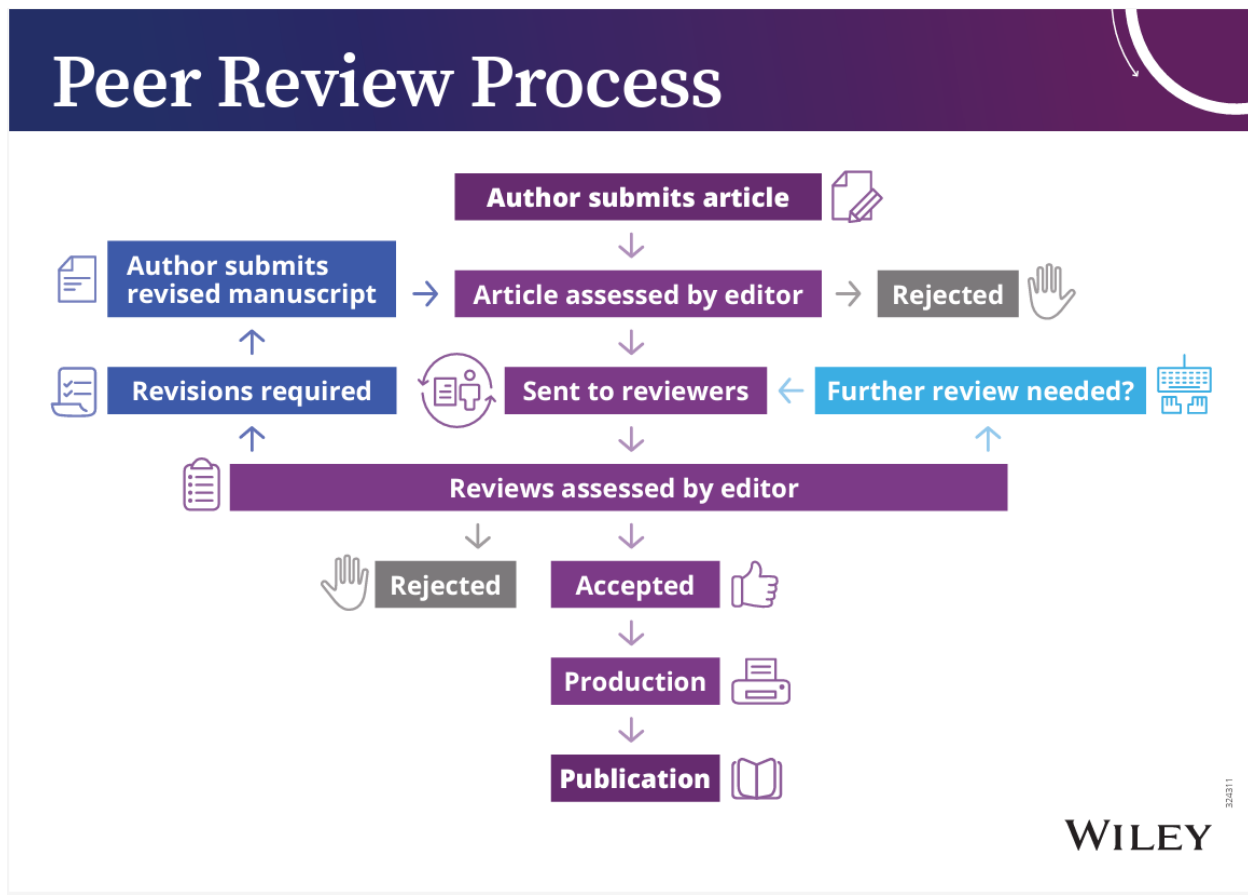


Figure 1: Wiley Peer Review Process

Manuscript review can involve multiple revisions and comments until a final decision is reached for publication, rejection, or withdrawal. The process can be complex and intensive, especially for the author, who is locked into often nebulous timelines until a decision is reached. Authors may also feel obligated to navigate the peer review process once it reaches the reviewer stage for multiple reasons (e.g., time commitment, known difficulties recruiting reviewers, and journal prestige).

Kaspar (2017) editorializes about peer review's purposes as "The primary value of peer review is two-fold: first, the assessment—both objective and expert—of new knowledge or practice to signify research that contributes innovation and new knowledge to scholarship and practice in a profession or a discipline; and, second, the indicator of quality and objectivity that this process provides to practitioners, scholars, and students about the information" (2017, p. 874). This sentiment is echoed in the work of Nicholas et. al. (2015), who discusses how peer review's familiar structure and reliance upon peer participation can increase confidence in a work's quality. Traditionally, peer-reviewed or refereed journals follow a single or double anonymized review process, which indicates the level of identity transparency for authors, reviewers, and editors. The Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers developed a taxonomy of terms such as:

- *Single anonymized*: Reviewer identity is not made visible to author, author identity is visible to reviewer, reviewer and author identity is visible to (decision-making) editor.
- *Double anonymized*: Reviewer identity is not made visible to author, author identity is not made visible to reviewer, reviewer and author identity is visible to (decision-making) editor (Jones et al., 2020, p. 4).

The case for using anonymized peer review leans heavily into the assumed ethical standards of its participants and easing participation for potential reviewers. Souder claims, “Many journal editors believe that blinding reviews make referees’ interests moot, and disclosures of conflicts of interest purge a research paper of bias” (2011, p. 57). Others claim that anonymous comments allow reviewers a shield to give honest feedback without fear of retaliation (Smith, 2021) and make it easier for editors to find reviewers (Souder, 2011). Other studies, particularly those about bias in peer review, claim reviewer obscurity goes against the spirit of scientific openness (Bence & Oppenheim, 2004) and fails to uphold reviewer accountability for comments or bias (Atkinson, 2001).

What does the literature propose to resolve reviewer bias and lack of accountability? Our research shows that calls for more open peer review processes are familiar and familiar to LIS. *Scholastica* and ACRL blogs recently identified open peer review as trends to watch. In a 2021 Scholarly Kitchen blog post, Kiermer and Mudditt discussed the benefits—reviewer accountability, credit for service, and higher quality constructive feedback—and challenges of revealing reviewer identities (2021, sec. “The Benefits of Open Identities”). Interestingly, they acknowledge some of the same concerns—bias and thorough constructive feedback—against open review other scholars have used to advocate for open. A key concern is the impact of transparent identities on those with marginalized identities or without significant power in the academic community. “The impact of open identities on those who are more vulnerable and hold less power is a very real one as consequences could range from full-on retaliation in peer review of papers or grants to more subtle consequences such as not being favored for talks and prizes” (Kiermer & Mudditt, 2021, sec. “The Case for Greater Caution”). The fear of retaliation feeds into potential reviewers’ willingness to participate in peer review and impacts reviewer pool diversity.

## **Bias in Peer Review**

Research about peer review processes and bias has a long history, even within library and information science. Lee et al. (2013) describe reviewer bias “as the violation of impartiality in the evaluation of a submission” (p.4). Their study further acknowledges four categories of bias: (1) manuscript quality or fit for the publication venue; (2) author identity or characteristics; (3) reviewer identity or characteristics; and (4) manuscript content (Lee et al., 2013, p. 5). For this study, we posit that author and reviewer identities or characteristics may be more robust indicators of potential bias occurrence. The existing literature seemingly supports this hypothesis, mainly when gender is considered. Our research found gender as the most identified author characteristic in peer reviewer bias literature (Lee et al., 2013; Lloyd, 1990; McGinty & Moore, 2008; Roh, 2016; Souder, 2011; Tomkins et al., 2017). Bias related to race and ethnicity is also discussed in the literature, most explicitly in the studies by scholars of color (Borchardt et al., 2022; Boyd, 2021; Morales et al., 2014; Roh, 2016).

If the peer reviewer pool remains predominantly homogenous, peer review culture will likely perpetuate the same processes and attitudes. Roh (2022) identifies “a fundamental problem of the culture of peer review: It is quite often critical and negative, sometimes even cruel” (p.100). For BIPOC scholars, encountering such hostility in a process in which they already comprise a minority of LIS workers can potentially increase their reticence to participate in scholarly publishing despite the wealth of knowledge they can contribute to the profession. Roh (2022) explicitly boosts *up//root* and a 2021 document called “Anti-racist scholarly reviewing practices: A heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors” as BIPOC-centric resources to counteract white supremacist and patriarchal systems.

## Methodology

During our research, the authors searched for an existing instrument applicable to BIPOC's experiences of navigating the LIS peer review process. Finding none that fit the questions we desired to research, the authors developed our own survey instrument. Study participants were asked to complete this author-developed survey exploring how implicit and explicit feedback bias impacts Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholarly writers in library and information studies from the perspectives of the writer and the reviewers during peer-review processes, including their navigation of the scholarly publication process. The survey questions were voluntary and question display logic was based on self-identification for writer experiences, then reviewer experiences if applicable. To have a well-rounded view, we included experiences of White and/or European descent participants to infer bias within the peer review process. We also allowed study participants to self-identify with a write-in field to include their racial and/or ethnic identifiers.

Based on the overarching research question of how implicit and explicit bias impacts BIPOC scholars in LIS from the writers' perspectives, we designed a survey divided into four sections of open- and closed-ended questions, including demographics, professional roles, and years of service, peer review processes, and experiences (comments and interactions). This survey analysis aimed to uncover which types of biases existed within the peer review process, if any. This article will discuss the survey results focused on peer review processes and experiences. Publishing these findings will assist in documenting different forms of biases in publishing within the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession. If we know what biases exist, we can create a list of norms to avoid harm for writers and peer-reviewers alike.

Recent membership statistics for the American Library Association (ALA) is 49,727 for 2021, the study's distribution year (American Library Association, 2023). The 2021 ALA demographic survey estimates BIPOC membership to be approximately 13.3% self-identifying by race or family origin (Rosa & Henke, 2017). We estimate the potential population pool to be approximately 6600 people. The survey was shared widely via social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds. It was also disseminated via ALA ethnic affiliates listservs groups, including AILA, APALA, CALA, BCALA, and REFORMA, and on professional listservs such as EBSS, WeHere, and ULS. The surveyors also relied on institutional networks to share the study. A mixed methods approach of quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed and examined through Qualtrics. The emerging themes were lack of support, gender bias, racism (implicit and explicit), and time constraints/unawareness of time limitations within the tenure

window. The required questions of personal demographics and whether participants have submitted a manuscript for the peer-review and the open-ended questions varied the responses per question. All other questions in this survey were optional. All questions in this survey were anonymous.

## Results

### Submission Requirements and Personal Identity

There were 147 survey respondents in total. Respondents were asked to self-identify their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Of those self-identified as White/Caucasian (58), Black or African American (36), Asian or Pacific Islander (25), Hispanic or Latinx (20), Write-in who further identified as Afro-Latina, Chicana-mixed, Afro-descendant, or mixed-race (20). Only two respondents selected prefer not to answer. A required question asked respondents if they had submitted a manuscript to a peer-review publication; 107 answered in the affirmative, while 19 answered in the negative. If respondents hadn't submitted to peer-review publication, the survey automatically closed.

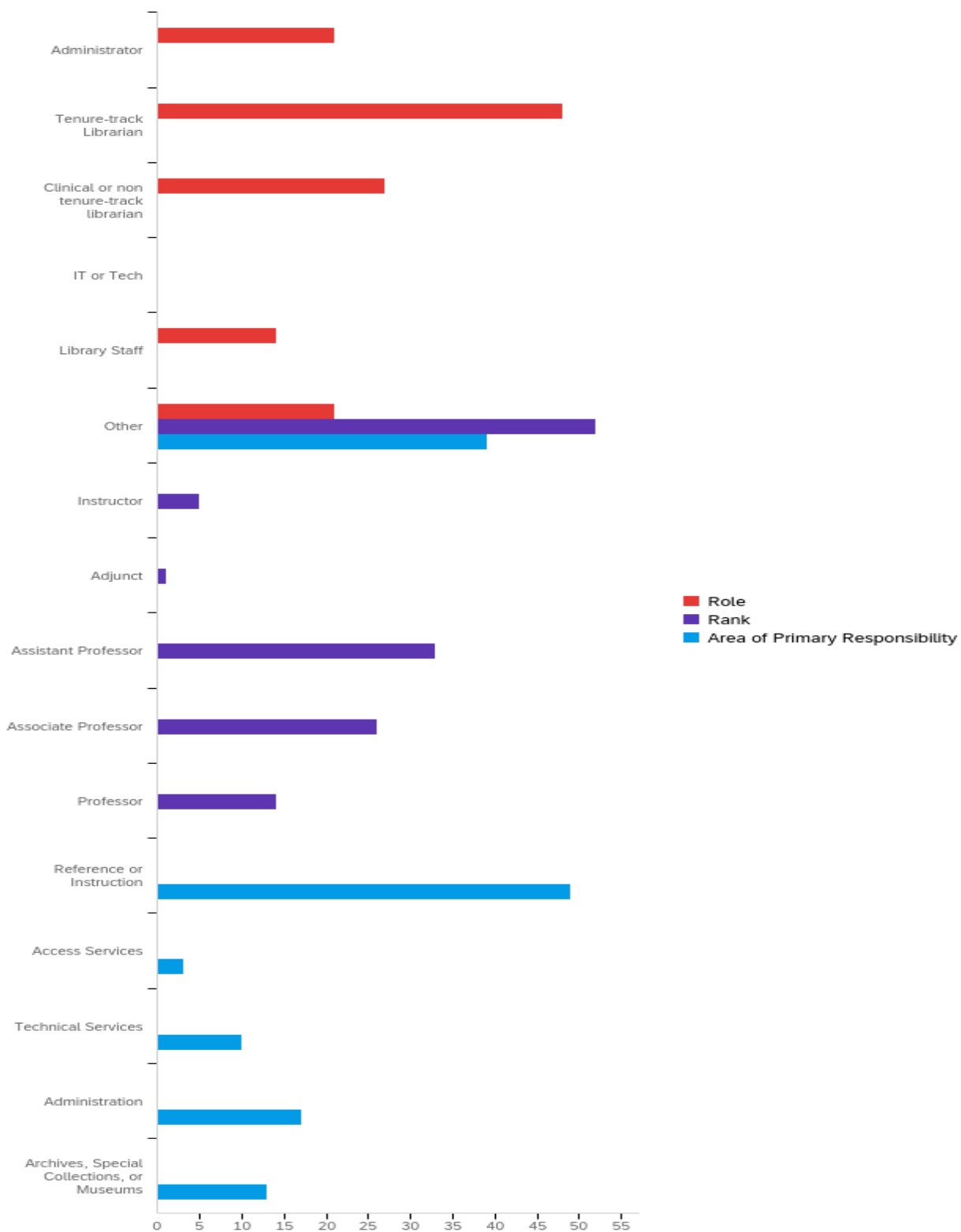
1	Black or African American	24.49%	36
2	Hispanic or Latinx	13.61%	20
3	Asian or Pacific Islander	17.01%	25
4	Indigenous or Native American	0.68%	1
5	White or Caucasian	39.46%	58
6	Write-in	3.40%	5
7	Prefer not to answer	1.36%	2
			147

*Table 1: Racial Demographics*

### Professional Ranking & Demographics

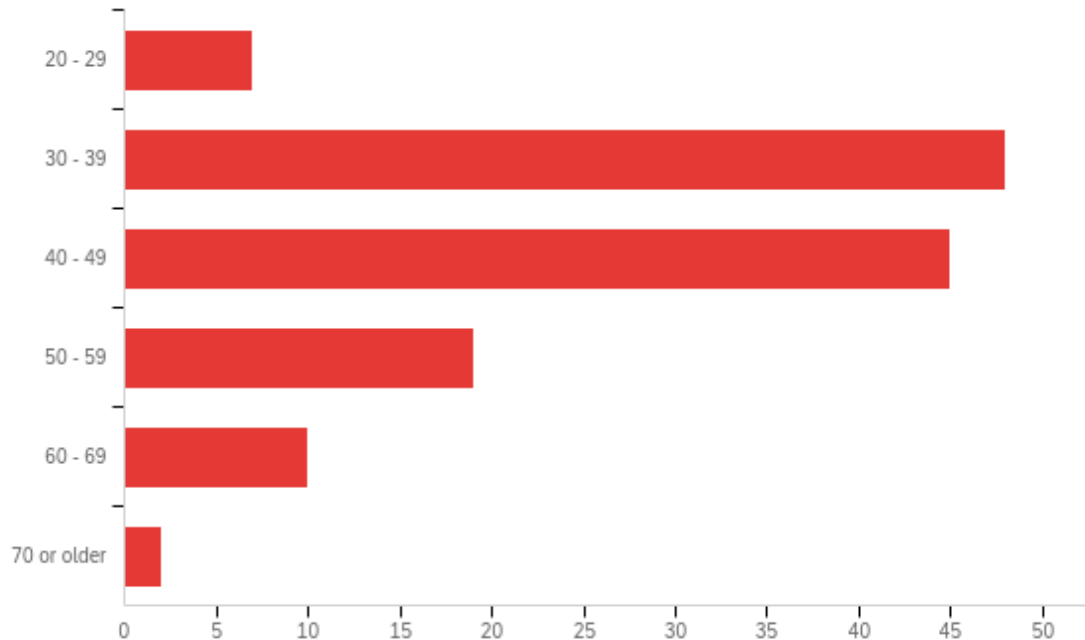
The majority of respondents listed their primary roles as tenure track librarians (48), ranked as assistant professors (33), and area of responsibility as reference and instruction (49). Remaining identified in terms of roles listed as other (21), administrator (21), and library staff (14). The following remaining ranks of other (52), associate professor (26), professor (14), instructor (5), and adjunct (1). Lastly, the remaining identifiers for the area of responsibility “other” (39), administration (17), archives, special collections, and museums (13), technical services (10), and access services (3). (See **Table 1**).

The majority of respondents were aged within the range of thirty to thirty-nine years of the year (48), followed closely by those aged forty to forty-nine years of age (45), and then aged fifty to fifty-nine years of age (19). The remainder of respondents were aged sixty to sixty-nine (10), twenty to twenty-nine (7), and seventy or older (2). (See **Figure 3**).



*Figure 2: Professional position*





*Figure 3: Age Range*

## Peer Review Background

The number of respondents had submitted manuscripts for peer review (N= 107). When asked how long the peer review process took, (N=25) responded less than three months, (N=23) three to six months, (N=15) six to nine months, and the latter (N=13) more than nine months. When asked how they would describe their overall experiences with peer review (on a scale of 1-10 with 1 (negative) to 10 (positive), slide the scale to reflect your experience), individuals (N=12) selected “7” somewhat positive experiences during the peer review process. With only (N=2) rated as a “1” or negative experience and (N=1) rated as a “10” entirely positive experience. The majority of the experiences of respondents were rated as a “6” (N= 7), “8” (N=9), or “9” (N=7). These somewhat positive experiences were based on a lack of biases-related incidents, which is explained later in this article. The following figure (**Figure 4**) ranks respondents’ Likert scale choice frequency.

### Likert Scale of Overall Experience

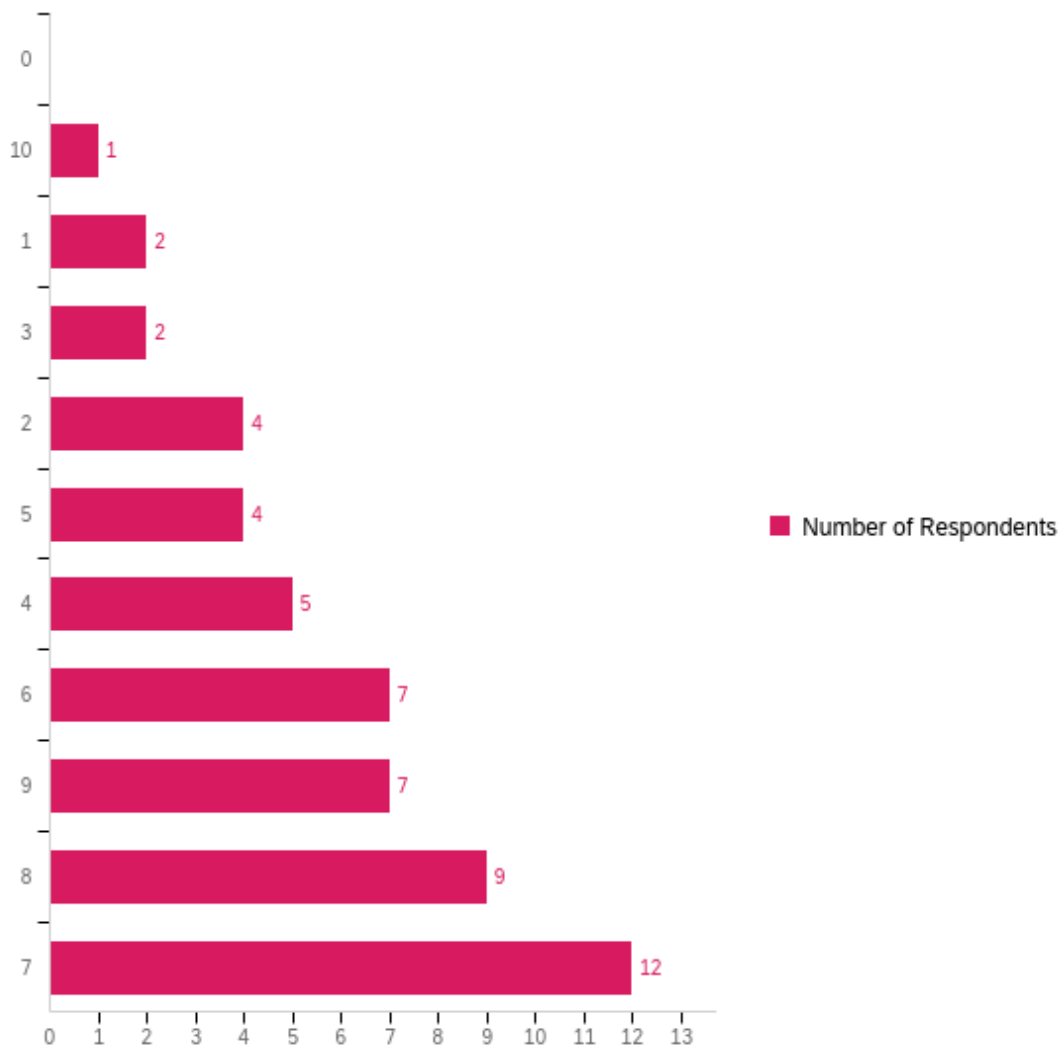
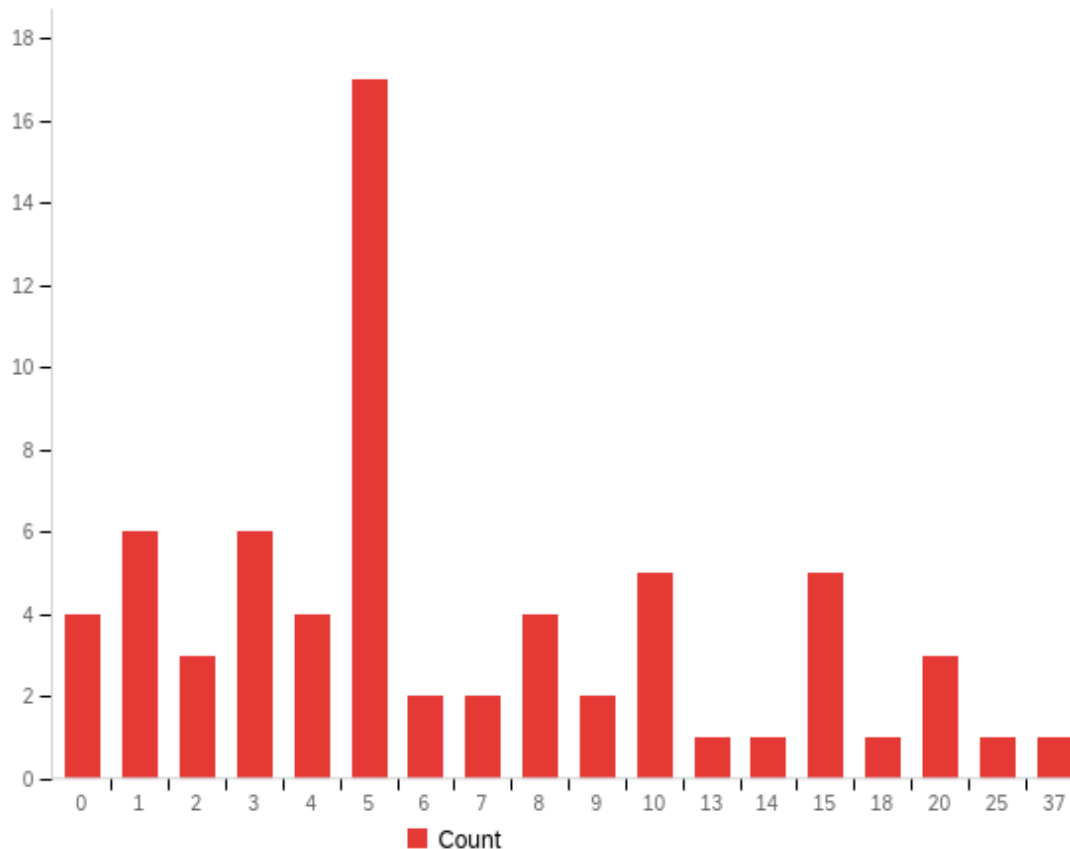


Figure 4: Likert Scale of Overall Experience

When asked how many calls for proposals were submitted within the last five years, respondents (N=17) submitted 5 proposals, (N=6) submitted 1 & 3 proposals, (N=5) submitted 10 & 15 proposals, while the rest submitted three or fewer proposals. Out of those CFPs, (N=15) responded that at least one proposal was submitted to peer-reviewed publications, and (N=12) submitted three. (See **Figure 5**).



*Figure 5: Calls for proposals have you submitted in the last 5 years?*

Respondents were asked approximately how many proposals they have submitted in the last 5 years (non-CFPs) with fielding questions regarding the number of proposals. For respondents that submitted 1-10 proposals (N=65) were accepted, (N=63) were published, (N=17) were pulled (i.e., you (the author) chose not to submit), and (N=34) were rejected. (See **Figure 6**).

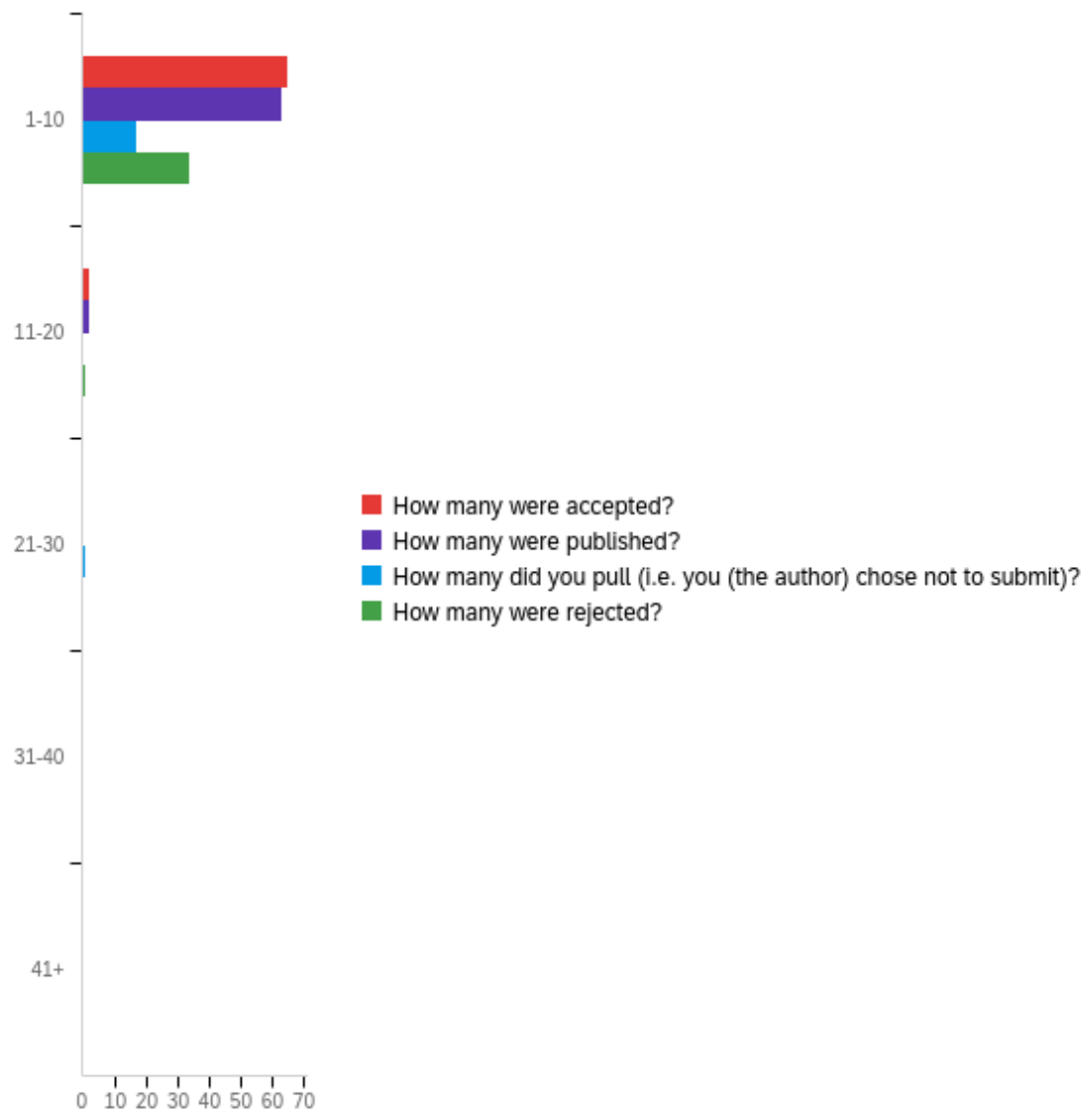


Figure 6: Approximately how many proposals have you submitted in the last 5 years

### Experiences with Peer Reviewers

Most respondents (N=39) believed that peer reviewers operate with implicit or unconscious bias when considering a manuscript. Compared to respondents that believed there maybe (N=11) and those that believed no (N=2) peer reviewers had an implicit bias.

Do reviewers operate with implicit or explicit bias?

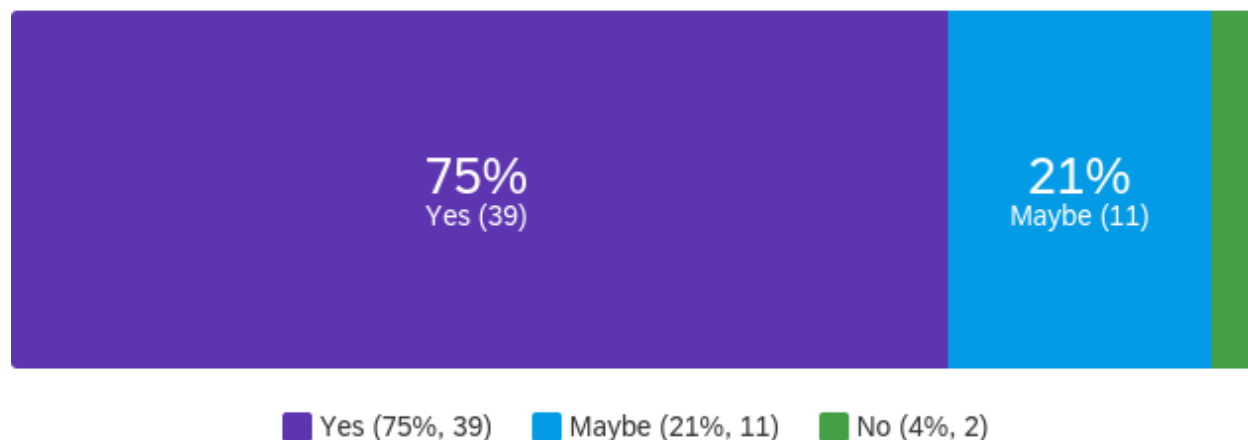


Figure 7: Do reviewers operate with implicit or explicit bias?

However, when asked to provide an example of experienced racial, ethnic, gender, or sexually-based bias during their peer review process, the majority of question respondents (N=32) were “unsure” or “didn’t know” if they experienced bias.

## Racial and Gender Bias

Individuals that responded in the affirmative about bias provided clear incidents of racial and gender bias.

Yes. In a specific example, when I was being peer-reviewed on something I wrote about diversity residencies, a peer reviewer that I'm quite sure was white wanted to know why the shit I went through needed to be offered for public consumption. I don't think this reviewer would have been convinced that white person [people] needed to censor themselves.

Yes, I was told that the reviewers did not want me to write about Black people in my research. It was classic anti-Blackness and racist intentions.

I "believe" I've experienced racial bias when submitting two manuscripts where I clearly identified myself as a Black woman. The comments I received back on my work were extremely harsh and belittling. The same publication chose to publish another example of my work in collaboration with a White author, and there were no comments about my writing skills or my understanding of the work.

Yes. A reviewer said I could not understand the topic I was writing about because of my gender.

I believe that there was a gender bias in my negative interaction with the peer review process, but I have no proof of it. My co-author and I inferred a strong masculine energy from Reviewer 2, and this reviewer judged us very harshly in the rubric and condescended us in their comments. There was nothing outright sexist in their comments, but the reviewer had a lot of criticism for our data analysis without any suggestions to

improve it. It felt like the reviewer was saying, "girls can't do math." As a reviewer, I try hard not to have biases, but I also recognize that I may not be doing this effectively. I also feel that the peer review process generally gatekeeps new librarians and upholds the white supremacist, classist, and sexist roots of librarianship.

I can't say that I explicitly have but I have felt like there was some bias. You could tell that the reviewer had never experienced or interacted with people from a lower socio-economic [sp] status or an immigrant status and they just kept asking us to exclude things about those groups

The process was so bad we withdrew our manuscript.

## **Content Expertise or Cultural Competency**

Respondents could provide examples of positive and negative interactions during the peer review process, which included clear bias against respondents. This shows that although respondents are unsure of implicit bias against them, they have occurred in their submission process. Negative interactions from respondents based on peer reviewers' lack of knowledge or cultural competency on critical race theory, lived experiences on BIPOC within librarianship, and tone-policing.

A research article was rejected by [XYZ journal] because I was told that it was not about libraries/librarianship, although it was about the health information seeking behavior of consumers, my target group because I am a consumer health librarian.

Overall as a Black female the peer-review process is flawed due to the patrimony, and institutional and structural racism that is based upon ostracizing those who look like me no matter the qualifications.

I've had some issues with reviewers uncomfortable with critical theory. They didn't understand the context it was applied to, and it made the review process longer without improving the manuscript.

As someone being peer-reviewed: there was at least one comment that questioned if we were making a really big leap in suggesting that white supremacy was embedded in higher education. We ended up addressing it afterwards, but I was surprised that we were being questioned to prove it.

As an author, I've been told that my writing was basic and simple (the same writing that has won awards in the past). I've been told [to] only centering the stories of BIPOC librarians and researchers is racist and that my work would be better if I also included the experiences of white librarians and researchers. I've also been told to cite the work of X person or Y person because they clearly have a better grasp on my topic, even though what X and Y are researching is only tangentially related to my topic and research.

Others mentioned a lack of knowledge of the methodology used by respondents, lack of feedback, or rude comments listed as "feedback" by peer reviewers.

One-word statements that aren't helpful: "incomplete".

On another occasion, we definitely had a reviewer who wished we had conducted a different study, claiming that we needed to have collected different data, recruited a different sample, etc. They seemed uninterested in the question we had actually posed and the data we'd needed to work with to answer it. It was stressful trying to figure out how to respond to it -- in the end we left those comments unaddressed by our revisions since we couldn't redo the entire study, and the editor was untroubled by it, so it ended well. But I wished the editor had either intervened with the reviewer (or given us clearer instructions that they knew those comments couldn't be addressed, and wouldn't need to be).

In a double-blind review process, I had a reviewer ask really basic questions about the methodology that indicated to me that they were totally unfamiliar with statistical analysis. It made me wonder why they were selected to review, how valid their comments were, and whether I'd chosen a good publication for that work.

An extremely abusive review provided "feedback" but was really an abusive tirade.

Negative, nitpicky, not helpful, no suggestions for improvement.

I've had some truly rude reviewers - their comments were so intensely personal and insulting [sp] about my intelligence or expertise

## **Timeliness and Communication**

Other negative interactions involved timing from manuscripts from peer-review to publication. Respondents were not provided timelines for edits, long wait times to hear back after submissions, and lack of communication about the process.

The time delays, not meeting stated deadlines is the only negativity I've experienced. They will tell you they will make a decision by [xyz] date, but you don't hear from them till way after that date.

Peer review itself was helpful but after 6 months, the editor told me they don't accept case studies. Seemed a waste of everyone's time to go through lengthy review if [they] didn't accept the methodology.

So far I have only had one article make it through the peer review process. It was an article that my co-author and I worked very hard on for over a year, and we submitted it to [a] highly ranked peer reviewed journal. It took us nearly two years to get from submission to publication, and we had to go through two rounds of peer review. One of our reviewers was outright hurtful in their reviews, calling our research question itself unsound. We had this reviewer through two rounds of peer review, and each time the reviewer recommended the journal reject our article. The reviewer asked for a lot of changes to our manuscript because they didn't "understand" things like the naming

convention we used for the double-blind process, while never offering any concrete suggestions to improve the content of the manuscript. It was clear to us that the journal editors felt our manuscript had value (which is why they didn't reject our submission), but that reviewer outright insulted our intelligence in their comments from the second round of review. We ultimately had to request another reviewer, which we got, and ended up having to cut almost everything we had added to the manuscript to try to please our negative reviewer. It was really difficult going through this process, and we almost pulled our article from review to submit to another journal. As I mentioned, we felt that the editors felt there was value in our work but I at least did not feel that they were very supportive through the process. This was my first peer reviewed article and I didn't know any better, but I told some of my more experienced colleagues about it and showed my mentor the comments from the reviewer. They were all surprised that the editors did not give us a new reviewer based on the comments from the first round of review.

It never feels good to get negative feedback, but I think my most negative interaction has been around the length of time it has taken to get reviews completed. On my most recent manuscript, the second round of reviews took 4+ months (the first round only took 3) for what ended up being very minimal changes.

## Positive Interactions

Positive interactions were available from respondents. Most cited constructive feedback and detailed suggestions, interactions with peer reviewers for clarifications, timeliness, and value of work were all reasons listed as positive interactions. These positive interactions remained, even if the manuscript was rejected for publication.

The reviewer offered [a] detailed response. I might not have agreed with everything, but I could tell that they really made an effort to engage with the entire paper and offered meaningful feedback that I could actually take and make changes with. They made it clear what changes they wanted to see.

I received very constructive and helpful feedback on my most recent manuscript that went through peer review. The reviewers highlighted gaps in my consultation of secondary sources and provided lists of other highly relevant sources to consult. The reviewers did a good job balancing positive and negative feedback in their reviews.

My first ever peer reviewed article was positive, although I was very surprised at how quickly I received feedback from the editor. It was less than an hour in time. After I made the corrections from the editor, the review process went smoothly. One editor deemed our article as written not appropriate for the journal, but gave us compliments on the writing quality and said if we changed the scope we could resubmit it for review. They were very communicative and constructive.

One rejection I received extremely constructive and carefully worded feedback from all of the reviewers.



## Willingness to Continue with the Process

Lastly, respondents were asked to provide clear examples of their interactions with the peer review process (either positive or negative) affected their view (i.e., unwilling to submit to another type of process). The majority of respondents (N=26) were willing to submit again because of the “publish or perish culture” and “requirements for tenure.” Respondents unwilling to submit again (N=15) cited that they wouldn’t publish with “certain journals again within LIS,” “lack of confidence in editorial boards,” and “changing topics to conform.”

Absolutely. They have reinforced to me that it's such a subjective process and editors are maybe the most important in their role as gatekeepers. Example 1: I had an article accepted by an editor (male) of an interdisciplinary humanities journal despite the single peer reviewer having said it wasn't publishable. (The reviewer fairly recognized that it was extremely overwritten and needed clarity in organization and argument.) He did ask me to extensively revise based on that reviewer's comments, but he chose not to put the article through another round of peer review and just reviewed it himself before it went into publication. Example 2: After a vague revise and resubmit process ("I don't see any reason why this couldn't be published if...") with an extremely flaky editor (male) of a major LIS journal, I was told that he liked the article and was pretty sure he wanted to publish it in the next issue but needed to see how it fit with the other pieces he was considering (note: it was not a special issue). That would have been weird but acceptable if he could confirm that he did want to publish it eventually, but when asked directly, he could not. It was niche enough, and the process had already been involved enough, that I did not pull the article or push back. In the end, it was indeed published [in] that next issue.

Yes. I won't deal with information science journals or professional organizations anymore.

I'm trying to decide right now if it's worth resubmitting or if I should withdraw. I've already been through one round of revisions, and one of the peer reviewers didn't think I addressed enough. But I also know that some of the changes requested require more work than I'm willing to do, so I'm not sure if I'll ever satisfy the reviewer or if continuing will just be a waste of time. However, the reviewer has made one major incorrect interpretation of my work, which both concerns me but also makes me think maybe I do have a shot once I explain this.

Respondents listed as “maybe” or “N/A” cited a possibility of willingness to submit again based on who was on the editorial board, possible time delays, and whether or not journals were open access or paywalled.

[I] would be more likely to submit to a publication where I know/respect the editors' work.

The time delays frustrate me but I have come to expect/accept it as part of the process.

I am committed as a Black female independent scientist to stay innovative, open to open

sourced platforms, ideas, and processes, and contributing to the update of all types of peer-review oriented work.

*Abusive communication:* most participants noted abusive communication regarding race or gender as reasoning only to submit to select LIS journals or not submit entirely. Respondents listed the peer reviewer feedback as dismissive, a waste of time, unhelpful, vague, and downright personally hurtful.

*Timeliness:* respondents explained that long wait times for reviews and complicated/vague feedback were reasons to withdraw their proposals and articles. This has been cited as a common issue in the scholarly writing process, not a singularity from LIS journals. However, the need for timelines was often mentioned by the respondents of this study.

*Lack of communication:* matters needed to be clarified with guidelines for resubmission or communication after the edits were returned. The lack of communication with harsh feedback caused mistrust among respondents.

*Lack of understanding:* respondents demonstrated a lack of trust in their peer reviewers' knowledge of their topics regarding race, gender, disability, and equity-related scholarship. Feedback from reviewers, including asking respondents to remove critical race theory from work, not mentioning gender, and only discussing issues that “all librarians could relate to,” was mentioned often. Reviewers' ignorance of these critical topics caused uncertainty and distrust for LIS journals.

## Implications / Discussion

For scholarly researchers, the peer review process was clearly marked with unnecessary hassles including time constraints, transactional reviews, and bias. Although the time constraints and transactional reviews didn't stop scholars from resubmitting to other journals, those experiences have made them reflect on the processes journals take before submission. Alternatively, negative interactions rooted in racial and gender bias made those scholars question submission to another peer-review publication perpetually. There is an urge for academic librarians to “publish or perish,” we must think about the damage done to BIPOC scholars and LIS scholarship in the process as a whole. If the LIS journals cannot support or do not have structures in place to mitigate harm (e.g., experts on critical race theory, social justice, and narrative explorations) for BIPOC / female / LGBTQIA+ scholars submitting to their publications, they should pause calls for proposals until standards for equity are implemented within their journal. LIS journals have emphasized a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but is there a genuine commitment to equity and inclusion within their publications?

Although the Library Publishing Coalition published *An Ethical Framework for Library Publishing*<sup>3</sup> in 2018, publishing within the field after its publication and during the process of this study has been more controversial and fraught with racial bias, including the exclusion of

---

<sup>3</sup> Library Publishing Coalition, “An ethical framework for library publishing,” Educopia Institute, 2018. <https://librarypublishing.org/resources/ethical-framework/>.

*Central Asian Journal of Global Health* to Scopus based on problematic reviewer assessment (Roh & Gabler, 2020), editing failures in *Journal of the Medical Library Association* (JMLA) (Akers, 2020), and the retraction of a book review by “an unqualified reviewer who centered their own feelings and experiences” (Roh & Gabler, 2020, p. 143). LIS journals preach inclusivity and support for BIPOC scholars. Still, data shows that only “9.1% provides professional development for journal workers to ensure inclusive practices (e.g., anti-bias training), 23.1% author guidelines encourage inclusive language (e.g., they/them) and variety of writing styles, and 34.6% actively and continuously encourage authors from underrepresented groups to submit manuscripts” (Borchardt et al., 2022, fig. 7). Equitable practices also weren’t self-reported by journals including paying authors, other points of contact, mentoring, proofreading, and open peer reviewers (Borchardt et al., 2022, sec. “Equity”). Allyship and public outcry ex post facto cannot exist as a sustainable motivation to spark peer review procedure revisions. Editorial boards and publishers must proactively enact initiatives and training for peer reviewers and commit to annual reviews.

The long-term effect of implicit bias in peer review is the need for unique voices in LIS scholarship. Most of the study respondents mentioned either not “*writing about innovation classroom instruction anymore*,” “*seek out only Open Access publications with collaborative review*,” or “*not deal with information science journals or professional organizations anymore*.” Or people exit the profession after a long editorial battle (Borchardt et al., 2022). This limits opportunities for BIPOC scholars and further blemishes the field. There’s a Black / African American adage, “Are there any of us there,” meaning are there any Black / African Americans in a particular location or setting? The less likely scholars see reviewers of shared identity, the less confident they are that their work will be understood or appropriately valued. Word of mouth, however helpful, is not enough to retain BIPOC scholars within the publication process.

LIS journals must steadfastly support and retain BIPOC scholars throughout the peer review process within their editorial boards. Open-access journal submissions don’t necessarily guarantee equitable practices (Borchardt et al., 2022). Therefore, editorial boards and teams must be trained in an inclusive peer review process, including but not limited to language bias, racism, ableism, sexism, and flexible/collaborative peer review processes. For example, the *Journal of Radical Librarianship* (JRL) allows the author and peer reviewer to opt in or out of the open peer review process. “For each submission, the author(s) and both reviewers state whether or not they agree to open peer review. If all three parties agree, then open peer review is conducted; if any one party disagrees, then a standard anonymous review is carried out” (Journal of Radical Librarianship, n.d., sec. “Peer review process”). The *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* (CJAL) provides clear outlines for reviewers to note before reading manuscripts prompting reviewers to include strengths as well as limitations in their reviews and note any conflict of interest; “reviewers must declare knowledge of the author if he or she detects his or her identity in the manuscript” (n.d.-a, sec. “Guidelines for peer review”). *CJAL* also provides clear timelines for submission and peer review process (n.d.-b, sec. “Tips for authors”) and name change (if a/n author/s changes their name or pronouns) policies for the authors (n.d.-a, sec. “Guidelines for peer review”). Providing clarity for authors at all process stages only enhances their understanding. *Communications in Information Literacy* (CIL) also provides clear and detailed instructions for authors and peer reviewers. CIL has *CIL Reviewer Guidelines*, a nine-page peer review document that includes how to review each section of a manuscript, do’s and

don'ts, and references for reviewers.<sup>4</sup> Although these guidelines don't include avoiding racial and gender bias within their guidelines, both encourage fairness during the peer review process. Providing clear guidelines and information regarding changes for not only submissions but the peer review process will improve some adverse reactions within the peer review process. However, more explicit guidelines for reporting and negating racial and gender bias and ableism must also be included. For example, *Weave: Journal of Library User Experience*'s article template includes examples of inclusive language regarding disability, pronouns, and harmful terms, including racist, sexist, and ableist.<sup>5</sup> Concise guidelines give the peer reviewer and contributors an understanding of meaningful and mutual exchange within the editing process. This process takes commitment to a larger-scale mission, which some editorial boards may not have the processes to develop quickly. Scholarly journal editorial boards and peer reviewers are traditionally voluntary and unpaid labor that exchanges service credit, at best. The library journal, *up//root knowledge*, does pay their authors and peer reviewers for their labor (Roh, 2022; n.d., sec. "About"). Intention and commitment on the part of editorial boards to ensure protection for everyone involved.

## Limitations

All studies have limitations despite the best intentions and expertise of researchers. We acknowledge this study's limitations and our effort to improve on the limitations in our control in future research efforts.

## Methodological limitations

- **Sample Size** - We received 147 survey responses with our participants self-identifying along asked race, ethnicity, gender identity, and other categories. While we exceeded our anticipated number of responses, our small sample size and results could be more quantitatively generalizable to the larger LIS academic population. However, our exploratory study provides great insight into the experiences and perspectives of writers and researchers navigating the peer review process.
- **Instrument** - The authors developed the survey instrument for the purposes of this study. We searched for existing validated and reliable instruments but found none that genuinely captured the detail we sought.
- **Data Collection** - As a qualitative study, the data is self-reported and cannot be independently verified. The data relies upon participants' experiences and perspectives. Thus, the responses encounter the potential limits of selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration. For example, one respondent stated they believe peer reviewers operate

---

<sup>4</sup>Hollister, C., Scheikhard, A., Brower, S., Baer, A., Gamtso, C., & McLure, M. (2020). CIL Reviewer Guidelines. Communications in Information Literacy (CIL); 2022-04-01.

[https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/reviewer\\_guidelines.pdf](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/reviewer_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Weave: Journal of Library User Experience. "Weave Article Template and Style Guide: Title Using Title Case," Weave: Journal of Library User Experience. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DAivBYdF8NnTouDnEHULRlp3z8elklqW/view>.

with implicit bias but could not remember a specific incident. Later, when our survey asked all respondents affirmatively of peer reviewers' implicit bias to provide negative and positive examples, all eligible participants did so. This is an example of selective memory that may potentially limit our analysis.

During our data collection and analysis period, we noted changes to make to future related studies. For example, our subsequent study would require demographic questions instead of voluntary ones. It was challenging to establish a baseline when the number of demographic responses was unequal.

We should have collected data on two areas that may inform future research. First, we should have included questions about open-access and traditional paywalled publications. Our focus for this study centered on general peer review experiences and the impact of anonymity between authors and reviewers. Secondly, we did not profoundly explore BIPOC and gendered intersections as we felt doing so would expand this study's scope and feasibility beyond our capacity at the time. We plan to explore BIPOC and gendered experiences in future research.

## Researcher Limitations

- **Access** - Our survey was distributed to significant LIS spaces where BIPOC scholars were most likely to see it. Our main distribution points were LIS ethnic caucus listservs and social media platforms such as ALA Connect, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. No one channel guarantees access to all the prospective participants we desire to recruit. Thus, our study is limited by our ability to place the call for participants in the most likely spaces the desired population will see.  
The second access limitation is a time constraint. We collected survey responses for approximately a month, representing a snapshot during ongoing pandemic uncertainty. Future studies may extend the active survey period to capture more data.
- **Researcher Bias** - Our research study stemmed from personal experiences as Black female librarians navigating predominately White institutions and LIS discipline. We researched existing LIS scholarship and analyzed survey question constructs to remove potentially leading language and align content language with the terminology used in LIS and ethnic studies. We also utilized survey readers of varying identities to provide constructive feedback before IRB approval.

## Future Research

The focus of this study involved the perceptions and experiences of researchers submitting to peer review publications. Amongst other goals, the authors intend this research to contribute to the scholarly conversation about how BIPOC researchers experience, perceive, and navigate peer review feedback bias. During this study and literature review, the authors noted the lack of support and understanding of the needs of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ contributors from the peer reviewers themselves. Therefore, the next step would be to analyze implicit bias and lack of training with who are actually peer reviewers or editors. Future research is needed to examine not only how peer reviewers interact with BIPOC scholars but also what sustainable structures

and guidelines are available for peer reviewers. Newer research has begun to question the need to move beyond value sets to actionable change (Borchardt et al., 2022). Still, we must have a better overall sense of what LIS journals are doing to educate on implicit bias and limit those interactions within the peer review process. Future research may also explore the implications of payment for peer reviewers for training and all services rendered. As LIS journals shift to more equitable practices for authors, they must also reevaluate their processes for their editorial boards year-round, not just for specialized issues or volumes.

## Conclusion

This study snapshots researchers' experiences and perceptions of implicit and explicit bias in the peer review process. Participants attributed negative interactions with an interest to no longer publishing within the field. Written abuse in personal attacks, lack of understanding of racial theories, and only needing diverse topics in specialized issues were all listed as reasons not to submit to journals or only submit to select LIS journals. These experiences are part of a more significant issue within the peer review process, outside of the standard focus on timeliness. BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ research must be included in specialized LIS journals and endorsed throughout the run.

The data also highlights a need for a shift in focus toward peer reviewers. The implicit peer review process should strive towards inclusive, not exclusionary, practices. As we think about the future of equitable practices, we must include all aspects of the peer review process, including the reviewer. LIS journal editors can no longer claim ignorance while dealing with diverse scholarship. Editorial boards must re-examine their commitment to the scholarly process through supporting, mentoring, and training all levels of scholars, including gender, race, and disability. This work can be a springboard for a reimagined peer review process with implications for improvement for LIS journals.

## References

- Akers, K. (2020). *An apology from JMLA | Journal of the Medical Library Association*. <https://jmla.mlanet.org/ojs/jmla/announcement/view/7>American Library Association. (2023). *ALA updates* [Text].
- ALA Updates. <https://www.ala.org/membership/updates>Atkinson, M. (2001). 'Peer review' culture. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 7(2), 193–204. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-001-0040-8>
- Bence, V., & Oppenheim, C. (2004). The influence of peer review on the research assessment exercise. *Journal of Information Science*, 30(4), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551504045854>
- Black, W. K., & Leysen, J. M. (1994). Scholarship and the academic librarian. *College & Research Libraries*, 55(3), 229–241. [https://doi.org/10.5860/crl\\_55\\_03\\_229](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_55_03_229)

- Borchardt, R., Bruce, S., Click, A., & Roh, C. (2022). Are we walking the talk? A snapshot of how academic journals are (or aren't) enacting disciplinary values. *In the Library With The Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2022/walking-the-talk/#fig07desc>
- Boyd, G. (2021). Indigenous knowledges and scholarly publishing: The failure of double-blind peer review. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 2(1), 34–40. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder44>
- Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship. (n.d.-a). *Guidelines for Peer Review*. Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship. Retrieved April 1, 2022, from <https://cjal.ca/index.php/capal/peerreview>
- Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship. (n.d.-b). *Tips for authors*. Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship. Retrieved April 1, 2022, from <https://cjal.ca/index.php/capal/tips>
- Harley, D., DHARL00@email.uky.edu. (2008). Maids of academe: African American women faculty at predominately white institutions. *Journal of African American Studies*, 12(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-007-9030-5>
- Hulbert, I. G., & Kendrick, C. (2023). *By any measure: The racial demographics of librarians* (pp. 1–14). Ithaca S+R. <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/by-any-measure/>
- Jones, L., Rossum, J. van, Mehmani, B., Black, C., Kowalczyk, M., Alam, S., Moylan, E., Stein, G., & Larkin, A. (2020). *A standard taxonomy for peer review*. <https://osf.io/68rnz/>
- Journal of Radical Librarianship. (n.d.). *About the Journal | Journal of Radical Librarianship*. Retrieved April 1, 2022, from <https://journal.radicalibrarianship.org/index.php/journal/about>
- Kaspar, W. (2017). The role and responsibility of peer review. *College & Research Libraries*, 78(7). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.7.874>
- Kiermer, V., & Mudditt, A. (2021, September 21). *Open reviewer identities: Full steam ahead or Proceed with Caution?* The Scholarly Kitchen. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/09/21/open-reviewer-identities-full-steam-ahead-or-proceed-with-caution/>
- Lee, C. J., Sugimoto, C. R., Zhang, G., & Cronin, B. (2013). Bias in peer review. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64(1), 2–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22784>
- Lloyd, M. E. (1990). Gender factors in reviewer recommendations for manuscript publication. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 23(4), 539–543. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1990.23-539>

- McGinty, S., & Moore, A. C. (2008). Role of gender in reviewers' appraisals of quality in political science books: A content analysis. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(4), 288–294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2008.05.001>
- Morales, M., Knowles, E. C., & Bourg, C. (2014). Diversity, social justice, and the future of libraries. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 14(3), 439–451. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2014.0017>
- Nicholas, D., Watkinson, A., Jamali, H. R., Herman, E., Tenopir, C., Volentine, R., Allard, S., & Levine, K. (2015). Peer review: Still king in the digital age. *Learned Publishing*, 28(1), 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.1087/20150104>
- Progressing towards shared peer review terminology: Interview with Lois Jones. (2021, September 20). *Scholastica*. <https://blog.scholasticahq.com/post/peer-review-taxonomy/>
- Roh, C. (2016). Inequalities in publishing. *Urban Library Journal*, 22(2), 1-16. <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol22/iss2/2/>
- Roh, C. (2022). Owning the peer review process: If we have to do this work, we should own it | Roh | College & Research Libraries News. *College & Research Libraries News*, 83(3). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.83.3.100>
- Roh, C., & Gabler, V. (2020). Systemic barriers and allyship in library publishing A case study reminder that no one is safe from racism. *College & Research Libraries News (C&RL News)*, 81(3), 141. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.81.3.141>
- Rosa, K., & Henke, K. (2017). *2017 ALA Demographic Study*. ALA Office for Research and Statistics. <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/19804>
- Sapon-White, R., King, V., & Christie, A. (2004). Supporting a culture of scholarship for academic librarians. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4(3), 407–421. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2004.0044>
- Smith, E. M. (2021). Reimagining the peer-review system for translational health science journals. *Clinical and Translational Science*, 14(4), 1210–1221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cts.13050>
- Souder, L. (2011). The ethics of scholarly peer review: A review of the literature. *Learned Publishing*, 24(1), 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.1087/20110109>
- Tomkins, A., Zhang, M., & Heavlin, W. D. (2017). Reviewer bias in single- versus double-blind peer review. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(48), 12708–12713. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1707323114>
- up//root knowledge. (n.d.). *About*. Up//Root Knowledge. Retrieved April 1, 2022, from <https://www.uproot.space/about>



Wiley Author Services. (n.d.). *What is peer review? : The peer review process.*  
<https://authorservices.wiley.com/asset/photos/Peer-Review-Process.pdf>