Barriers and Bridges: Lived Experiences of Immigrant Staff in German Libraries

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Session 210a: Library services: empowering people to develop their inter-cultural identities
IFLA Section 32: Library Services to Multicultural Populations
“The staff of a multicultural library should reflect the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the community.”

IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto
23% of German residents are immigrants as defined in public policy

Without migration background 77%

With migration background 23%

First generation
9%

Second gen., 2%

First generation
6%

Second generation
5%

Holding only foreign citizenship 11%

Holding German citizenship 11%

Total population: 82.4 million

Immigration has been on the rise for decades. Is this reflected by library workers?

Migration to and from Germany, 1950-2015

Population studied

Library workers with migration backgrounds among the ~1100 staff in Berlin’s 80 public libraries

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Berlin: 1 city, 13 library systems, serving very different communities of users

Representation of immigrants by library system / district: among library users and in overall population

Immigrants are *underrepresented* among library users and staff in Berlin

Overall population: 32%
Public library users: 22%
Public library workers: 3% – 11%

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A study of lived experiences

Research question
What challenges and opportunities do immigrant library workers in Germany experience?

Theoretical basis
phenomenology, Critical Race Theory, #critlib

Qualitative methodology
Survey + 12 interviews + analysis

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Library

**Staff lacking intercultural competence**
- *Berührungsängste*

**Library can be intimidating**
- Librarian image: "shhhhh!" vs. approachable
- Library not really serving everyone

**Language barriers**

**Discrimination from staff**

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**Users**

**Users discriminating against me**
- Users othering me
- Users making assumptions
- Discriminatory actions
- Speaking up vs. not speaking up

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**Bridges**

**Truly intercultural services**
- Not a one way street!
- "here's your shelf" vs. access to everything

**Inclusion and participation**

**Doing foreign language collections right**
- Investing in language expertise

**Transforming role of libraries in society**
- Old vs. new image
- Space for books vs. space for people

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**Staff not reflecting community**

**Feeling isolated**
- Issues with German
- Staff discriminating against me
- Library has strict hierarchies

**Applying for jobs/school**
- German vs. foreign credentials
- Working below skill or pay level

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**Immigrant library worker**

**Feeling accepted**
- Belonging to a team
- Supportive bosses

**Libraries hiring for intercultural competence**
- Libraries attracting more immigrant staff

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**Bridges**

**Intercultural competence**
- Understanding immigrant users' needs
- Empathy with immigrant experience

**Bridging language barriers**
- Using foreign language skills
- Ideas from foreign libraries
- Organizing outreach, events

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* The code cloud around "discrimination from users" is also relevant for the code "discrimination from staff"
Immigrant library workers build bridges to users

1. Empathy with feeling out of place
2. Language skills
3. Bridging language barriers
4. Different perspective
5. Standing for inclusion

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Immigrant library workers face barriers at work

1. Being the only one
2. Structural and hiring discrimination
3. Interpersonal discrimination
4. German language, culture (new immigrants)
5. Losing hope
The message for libraries:

1. **Listen** to immigrant staff
2. **Value** the bridges they build
3. **Break down** the barriers

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How to learn more

More about this study: leslie@lesliekuo.com


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