



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Most White people, in my experience, tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know that they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native American. Whiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning.”

-From *Portraits of White Racism*, by David T. Wellman, 1993

I am taking a class this semester called Library Services to Hispanic Patrons. At our first class meeting, the professor made a point of talking about the word “Hispanic” – where it comes from, whether or not it is an appropriate word to be using. Later, when I looked it up in the latest *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, I found it comes from “Hispania,” Iberian Peninsula, Spain, and it is defined as: “of, relating to, or being a person of Latin American descent living in the U.S.; esp: one of Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin.”

While I was looking up words in the dictionary, I also looked up “Latino” and “Latina,” which are the terms preferred by my teacher and others. “Latino: 1. a native or inhabitant of Latin America 2. a person of Latin-American origin living in the U.S.” “Latina” has the same definition, but only as it applies to a woman or girl.

However, no matter which words are used to des-

cribe any of us, the real question for libraries is how to make sure we provide the services our community wants and needs. My class focuses on one group, but everything we are studying applies to any group of people, whether they are brought together by race, language, country of origin, gender, age, abilities, and any other way we have of categorizing people. The challenge for any public library is to not only find out what is needed, but also to know if the services and materials that are offered are appropriate.

One enlightening article I read is called “See, Hear, and Speak No Evil (Examining Multicultural Mass Media)” by Clara M. Chu. In her piece, Ms. Chu discusses the way in which library materials - whether they are books, websites, software, DVDs or videos - can be biased without intending to be. She gives several thought provoking examples of this. For instance, she talks about the

idea of “invisibility” – where, by simply leaving out a group, we are giving out biased information. An example of this would be a video about pilots that only shows white men – implying that other groups, such as women, don’t qualify. This kind of bias is subtle but has a long reach – I grew up with this stereotype and I still struggle to think “female” when I hear the word pilot.

She also makes one simple point about library signs: In some libraries, non-English materials are called “Foreign Languages” instead of “International Languages.” With the first choice, there is an implication that if a language isn’t English, it is in some way foreign or strange. I had a related experience with this concept years ago when I was in charge of a grant project to buy materials for people who are learning English. Traditionally, these items have been labeled “ESL,”

which stands for English as a Second Language. But of course, many people who are learning English already speak two or more languages – so English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is more appropriate.

Learning to pay attention to subtle messages requires thinking in a different way. At a public library it is our job to try to do this, by closely examining what we are buying and how we are presenting our offerings. When we do this well, we provide a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for everyone.