

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Journal of Librarianship and Information Science**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/78368>

Published paper

Birdi, B., Wilson, K. and Mansoor, S. (2012) *'What we should strive for is Britishness': an attitudinal investigation of ethnic diversity and the public library*. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 44 (2). pp. 118-128.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961000611426299>

White Rose Research Online
eprints@whiterose.ac.uk

**‘What we should strive for is Britishness’: an attitudinal
investigation of ethnic diversity and the public library**

Briony Birdi, Kerry Wilson and Sami Mansoor

Briony Birdi (née Train) is a Lecturer in Librarianship and Director of CPLIS (the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society) at the Information School, University of Sheffield. Former Research Associate **Kerry Wilson** is currently a Lecturer at the Centre for Cultural Leadership, Liverpool John Moores University; and Sheffield MA in Librarianship graduate (2005-6) **Sami Mansoor** is now the UK PubMed Central Support Officer, British Library.

Briony Birdi

Lecturer in Librarianship
Information School
University of Sheffield
Regent Court
211 Portobello Street
Sheffield
S1 4DP
Tel. 0114 222 2653
b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk

Kerry Wilson

Lecturer, Centre for Cultural Leadership
Faculty of Media, Arts and Social Science
Liverpool John Moores University
G15, 68 Hope Street
Liverpool
L1 9HW
Tel. 0151 231 5928
K.M.Wilson@ljmu.ac.uk

Sami Mansoor

UK PubMed Central Support Officer
The British Library
Boston Spa
Wetherby
West Yorkshire
LS21 7BQ
Tel. 0870 444 1500
Sami.Mansoor@bl.uk

‘What we should strive for is Britishness’: an attitudinal investigation of ethnic diversity and the public library

Abstract

This paper considers the role of the public library in ameliorating relations between communities, and the appropriateness of a multicultural or assimilationist approach via which to deliver socially inclusive services. Qualitative findings from two inductive studies, each of which focused on different aspects of the capacity of public library staff to deliver culturally inclusive services, are analyzed in relation to concepts such as social capital, cultural and ethnic diversity, institutional racism and cultural awareness. The paper focuses on staffing issues and on the provision of the ‘multicultural text’. It is concluded that recruitment strategies are slow to address the homogeneity of the current library workforce, and that a revised approach to recruitment and subsequent training should be made. Furthermore, it is suggested that a community-wide exposure to materials about other ethnic cultures can contribute to the reduction of existing social fragmentation.

Keywords

Cultural diversity, public library, multicultural, assimilation, intercultural, social capital.

Introduction: a changing cultural profile

Data from the most recent national Census - held on 29 April 2001 – showed the total UK population at that time to be 58,789,194, and the non-white population to be 4,635,296 (7.9%) (Office for National Statistics, 2003). No further Census has been conducted since that time, but estimated figures released by the Office for National Statistics in 2010 for the period mid-2001 to mid-2007 in England and Wales only suggest that of an overall population of 54,072,000, the number of ‘non-white’ people was 6,095,000, or 11.27% of the total (Office for National Statistics, 2010). Although these are only experimental statistics (and only relate to England and Wales), they are indication that the minority population in the UK is increasing in size.

Western attitudes towards the concept of immigration, and consequently to the provision of services for minority ethnic communities, can be differentiated by ideological persuasion. Berger (2002) identifies three phases: *Laissez-faire*, where there is little formal policy; *Plural Integration*, where new cultures sit alongside existing mainstream culture and cultural diversity is promoted; and *Assimilation*, which encourages incoming ethnic minorities to adopt facets of the mainstream culture. In practice, there is no clear-cut division between the three phases, as all cultural transition is likely to involve a balance of pluralization and assimilation. Despite this, the immigration debate usually proceeds as if an action must fall into one or other of the three categories. Whereas Elbehausen and Skov (2004) argue the case for integration, or assimilation, critics such as Barter strongly promote multiculturalism whereby, he argues, people are exposed to ‘a diversity of cultures and heritages ... and learn to respect others and their ideas’ (1996:13). In describing their ‘intercultural city’ Wood & Landry (2008)

similarly propose that ‘we should interact more with each other because we live side by side. Only then will we foster empathy by learning more of each other and reduce the distrust between people’ (5). However, in 1997 Taylor called for ‘an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon where the relative worth of different cultures might be evident’, suggesting that this ‘would mean breaking with an illusion that still holds many multiculturalists...in its grip’ (126).

Certainly, it has been observed by certain social commentators that the concept of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported’ (OED, 2010), has not been entirely successful. In 2004 Trevor Philips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, asserted that the term ‘suggested separateness and had ceased to be useful in modern Britain’ (BBC, 2004), and three years later that ‘living separately means that different groups of people have their life experiences defined by their ethnicity rather than their ambitions, and this differentiation starts young’ (CRE, 2007). In 2006 the previous Labour government launched a Commission on Integration and Cohesion, in order to address what they saw as increasing segregation and minimal contact between different minority ethnic communities in the UK (BBC, 2006).

The research context

Operating within this complex environment, the contemporary UK public library service has been selected as the context for this paper, primarily because of its function as a service for all members of society, and its perceived role in

ameliorating relations between communities (MLA, 2005). Yet is it the role of the library to promote pluralistic integration (generally referred to as multiculturalism), to assist new cultures with assimilation into the mainstream culture, or would neither approach be appropriate? A multicultural approach, in focusing on the ‘enrichment of society as a whole through the expansion of cultural horizons’ (Sturges, 2004:297), would suggest that minority ethnic provision should be targeting all users of libraries, whilst an assimilationist approach would encourage the specific targeting of minority ethnic communities.

To summarise, the two principal research questions upon which this paper is based are as follows:

- Are the current minority ethnic services reaching ‘the right people’?
- Do public library staff have the most appropriate skills and attitudes with which to deliver these services?

In order to respond to these far-reaching questions, this paper will draw from theories of multiculturalism and social capital, in order to explore the relevant literature and the findings of two recent studies, each of which focuses in part or entirely on public library services to minority ethnic communities, and staff attitudes towards the provision of those services. The first is an AHRC-funded project into the role of empathy in community librarianship¹, hereafter described as ‘Study 1’. The second is a Masters dissertation (supervised by Birdi), which investigated staff attitudes towards services for minority ethnic communities in predominantly white geographical areas (Mansoor, 2006), hereafter described as

‘Study 2’. The focus of Study 1 was on the concept of social inclusion in general terms, whereas Study 2 was a specific investigation of services to minority ethnic communities. Each inductive study was primarily qualitative, although triangulated both quantitative and qualitative methods, in surveys and interviews/focus groups with library staff. Data collected from questionnaire surveys were then used to form interview/focus group schedules. Such a methodology promotes a recursive research process (Gorman and Clayton, 1997) of several research stages: establishing a theoretical framework, formulating a research plan, collecting and interpreting data, and reporting findings. These stages are fluid, with movement between them as some stages are revisited.

Social capital and the public library service

Lupton and Power (2002: 118) discuss the ‘spatial concentration’ of poverty and social exclusion in Britain, stating that the gap between the poorest and more affluent areas has become increasingly polarised: in the late 1990s, up to 4000 neighbourhoods had been identified as ‘pockets of intense deprivation’ caused by acute unemployment, crime, poor health, housing and education. In a study of the reality of social exclusion within communities, and particularly on housing estates, it was confirmed that those most vulnerable to social exclusion were likely to be poorly educated, low skilled and de-motivated, with low expectations. The values and ‘norms’ of such vulnerable groups, despite being in the minority, were perceived as defining the culture of an estate and colouring its reputation in the neighbourhood and community (Page, 2000). Social divisions are thus reinforced by the identification of neighbourhoods and communities, and their

inhabitants, as undesirable and underachieving, causing localised social fragmentation (Crow and Maclean, 2000).

The spatial concentration of excluded and disadvantaged groups and their associated problems causes low levels of social engagement and civic interaction, often described as social capital. In recent years, discussion surrounding the effects of social exclusion has become more closely linked to the concept of social capital, and the impact upon 'people's ability to participate in society' (Page, 2000).

Arguably the most widely accepted definition of the term comes from Putnam (1993), for whom social capital refers to those 'features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit' (35). Hillenbrand (2005) comments that social capital remains a 'contentious subject' with no definitive conceptual definition, although its academic and philosophical popularity has increased, having transcended its original theoretical disciplines of sociology, economics and political science, to be widely discussed and acknowledged in a wide range of policy fields such as community studies, education, occupational science and governance.

The idea of developing social capital is subsequently being incorporated into policies and programmes to address social exclusion, including notions of developing community networks, encouraging civic and community engagement, establishing community identity and solidarity, and norms of trust, help and

support (Percy-Smith, 2000). As Putnam proposes, ‘Working together is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital’ (idem, 36).

A review of the literature concerning public libraries as developers of social capital concludes that the service encourages civic engagement by bringing citizens together, upholds democratic ideals by making information freely available to all citizens, bridges social capital by engaging in partnerships with other community organizations, encourages trust through social inclusion and cohesion, facilitates local dialogue, and fosters community participation in a public space (Hillebrand, 2005; Vårheim, 2007). Kerslake and Kinnell (1998) assert that it is the public libraries’ role as a promoter of citizenship and democracy that illustrates its true value as a socially inclusive service, and Goulding (2004) writes of libraries’ ‘potential for building social capital’, and of ‘their value as a public space that brings together diverse populations into one community to learn, gather information and reflect’ (4).

Field (2003) uses the term social capital as a way of conceptualising the intangible resources, shared values and trust which people draw upon in everyday life. A consequence for social exclusion is that social capital can promote inequality as access to different networks is distributed unequally, and can therefore be used as resources of status and privilege at the expense of others. Those with high levels of financial and cultural capital are more likely to have higher levels of social capital. An illustration of this issue can be found in the recent research by Japzon & Gong (2008) into public library use in New York, in which it is argued that ‘public library use is related to the social

interaction of the residents within a neighborhood’, and that ‘social segregation may hinder the use of public libraries by the disadvantaged groups’ (446). The authors offer a means of reducing these problems by suggesting that ‘library branches in disadvantaged neighbourhoods should get higher budgets than are proportional to their circulation figures’ (462). However, another strategy, proposed by Vårheim (2007), is that the library should instead ‘offer better core services and...make services more universal by attracting new groups of library users....universal public policies create social capital, especially if they are public services in close contact with the user.’

A number of recent reports have also sought to highlight the impact, both actual and potential, that public libraries have in specific areas of targeting the causes of social exclusion, and thereby increasing social capital. In addition to the strategic documents from professional bodies providing recommendations for how the public library service can contribute to social policy objectives, such objectives are well communicated in the sector’s professional press, illustrating a ‘professional consciousness’ at certain levels relating to the obligations of public service. Summaries of policy drivers published by the previous Government’s Social Exclusion Task Force and the Local Government White Paper ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ for example are discussed by Vincent (2007a), who also explores the perceived changing political context of social exclusion, different definitions and objectives used within the debate, and questions where public libraries ‘fit in’ (Vincent, 2007b).

The role of the public library service in supporting cultural diversity

Audunson (2005) describes public librarianship as ‘a child of multiculturalism’, given the role of the public library service in supporting immigrants to the United States, and in supporting all members of a rapidly changing industrial society of more than a century ago. One of the earliest modern references to library services for minority ethnic communities was made in an edited volume entitled ‘Library services to the disadvantaged’ (Croker, 1975), in which the author focused specifically on South Asian immigrants. The first large-scale piece of research into the provision of public library services for minority ethnic communities in Britain was conducted by Clough and Quarmby (1978), who included participants from a diverse range of backgrounds in their study. They aimed to produce a national picture of services to minority ethnic communities, but acknowledged cultural differences between the participants, separating the major communities and providing background cultural information for each. Both texts were produced a relatively short time after a period of major immigration, and as a consequence focused almost exclusively on participants who were born outside the UK. Croker, for example, refers to her subjects as ‘newcomers’, and considers that ethnic minority provision at the time is regarded as a temporary affair, with library staff believing that demand will eventually ‘taper off’ (1975:127).

At the beginning of the next decade, Coleman (1981) writes when library staff are starting to address the permanence of the issue. She also recognizes that there are issues particular to members of minority ethnic communities who were born in the UK, suggesting that there can be ‘an increasing emphasis placed on traditional culture, the mother-tongue, and religion’ (1981:25). She also begins to

formulate the notion, touched upon by Clough and Quarmby (1978), that minority ethnic service provision has a role not just for the communities themselves, but also for white people.

This reflects Elkin's (2003) view that the public library service should be 'pushing at people's awareness and perceptions of society, promoting thinking on diversity and cultural awareness, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to read broadly.' Despite this description of the 'ideal', Elkin nonetheless suggests that today's service is not engaging with this role, 'reflecting the national lack of interest in promoting the strengths of a multicultural society' (137). And Audunson (2005) describes the challenge faced by today's public library service, of 'achieving cultural community and accepting and promoting cultural diversity'.

The threat of institutional racism

In their well-publicized 1998 study, Roach and Morrison acknowledged that public libraries had by then recognized some of the challenges of ethnic diversity, but suggested nonetheless that the insularity of a library is a barrier, concluding: 'there is little evidence that libraries have developed strategic programmes in response to ethnic diversity' (1998:167). Replacing 'multiculturalism', which for the authors implies the management of a problem by a white majority, with a consideration of 'ethnic diversity' and 'anti-racism', their research consisted of an audit and extended case studies encompassing ethnic minority involvement in policy, communication with minority ethnic communities, marketing and promotion, and the identification of good practice in

library services. Such an approach was deeper than Clough and Quarmby's 1978 study, but was still focused primarily upon libraries 'in ethnically diverse settings' (Roach and Morrison, 1998:10).

The MacPherson report, produced after the death of teenager Stephen Lawrence, considered the issue of institutional racism in the public sector, and concluded that much remains to be done in terms of combating racism within those institutions which serve the public, including the public library service (MacPherson, 1999).

In the late 1990s, after Labour's 1997 General Election victory and in the aftermath of Roach and Morrison's study, the literature describes a different approach to the topic, considering that libraries should not only improve their provision of services to minority ethnic communities, but that they may have a role to play in building a society that is more aware and understanding of differences between cultures. It becomes a library's role to introduce people to 'communities other than their own' (Train et al., 2000:487), or to assist in 'the creation of a more equal, tolerant and pluralist society' (Roach and Morrison, 1999:113), thereby contributing to 'harmony and to social enrichment' (Sturges, 2004:300).

Peters' 2000 study of multicultural public library services included an interview question which asked library staff respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'public libraries suffer from institutional racism'.

One of the Chief Librarians interviewed for the research believed that progress had been made within the service, but as the author noted in her analysis:

‘...his response was to ‘agree’ because “we think we are better than we are”...he cautioned that sometimes, just because a library thinks it has provided a few books for an ethnic minority group, they have done their bit, and he suspected that this attitude had traces of the institutionally racist in it, “institutional racism being a kind of inherent tendency to...[make] assumptions about people without verifying or checking”.’
(Peters, 2000:58)

More recently, this complex issue was raised in Study 2, in which one librarian interviewee referred to ‘an element of prejudice amongst the old guard of staff, it’s a kind of institutional thing in a way’ (Mansoor, 2006: 46).

Cultural diversity and the public library workforce

Taking into account the Census figures given above and regarding the users of public library services, data collected by CIPFA (The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) state that 9.1% of library users are not white, which is ‘roughly comparable’ to the percentage of non-white people in the total population of the UK (CIPFA, 2006).

Could it be said that the public library workforce reflects these proportions? The 2005 Library Workforce Survey revealed that within the library workforce 6.7% of staff were from ethnic minorities, 83.8% were white, whilst information on the

remaining 9.5% was not known. The employment of staff from ethnic minorities was highest amongst administrative staff (11.9%) and lower amongst support staff (7.0%), professional staff (5.0%) and managerial staff (3.1%) (Employers' Organization, 2006:11).

Cultural diversity amongst public library staff has been an issue of close scrutiny for some time. Datta and Simsova (1989) noted that ethnic minorities are 'underrepresented at all levels of public library staffing', and Ocholla (2002) observes that workplace diversity within the South African library and information profession, suffers from a degree of complacency, and a priority to placate existing staff members rather than thinking of future workforce development.

A social inclusion consultation project undertaken by the public library service, Nottinghamshire County Council, found that users often felt 'pre-judged' by library staff meaning that staff were, consciously or unconsciously, presenting barriers for certain people and groups, a finding that was informed by discussion with respondents from one of the most deprived estates in the county (Wright, 2002). Pateman (2002) notes the 'failure' of public library leaders in the UK to reflect race and class in their equal opportunity statements and their staff recruitment, development and service improvement strategies, and the failure of public library services to reflect the diversity of their communities. This raises interesting questions regarding the definition of cultural diversity with reference to social inclusion, and the capacity of the public library service to have a representative workforce.

In line with the national statistics given above, the 453 respondents to the national library staff survey conducted as part of Study 1 were predominantly white (89.6%), with other ethnic groups represented only in very small numbers. Respondents were divided as to whether or not such a homogenous workforce had implications for the delivery of socially inclusive services, with opinion shaped by personal identity and experience. Certain respondents claimed that staff are capable of empathy irrespective of their own cultural background, and that the ability to deliver socially inclusive services is dependant upon skill and personality traits rather than identity:

‘I’m inclined to say yes it should [have implications], but I’m not so sure in practice, as long as the white middle aged women are open minded and good at their job.’

‘It’s also somewhat negatively assuming that white-British middle aged women are not capable of being socially inclusive, which isn’t necessarily correct. It’s the skills they have that matter.’

Those who disagreed thought the homogenous profile would have a negative impact from a user perspective, particularly in terms of the first impressions of a library service that people may have. There was an assumption that people may have a sense of ‘not belonging’ if their profile differed from an all-white, female, middle-aged environment, even if they were from English speaking and from settled communities:

‘It does have an impact though; those first impressions can turn someone round and right back out of the door.’

‘... people coming in want to see people like them in the library, don’t they? Otherwise they assume it’s only a place for white, middle-aged, middle class women!’

These views are supported by Tso (2007), whose study of library services to the Sheffield Chinese community found that a number of both staff and users felt that the ‘traditionally disadvantaged’ groups may place a greater degree of trust and confidence in people they recognize as familiar, or relate to and understand.

Staff attitudes towards ethnic diversity

In 1999 Roach and Morrison considered those public library staff who had not ‘responded positively’ to the challenges of ethnic minority provision, and suggested that their arguments would generally fall into one or more of the following categories:

- They do not know what to do, how to act
- They feel that there are insufficient funds to do anything new
- They believe that there is no need to do anything as ethnicity will fade as an issue through cultural assimilation
- They feel that they have already responded adequately to issues of ethnic diversity.

Almost ten years later, the first two of those justifications (in particular) can be clearly seen in the staff responses for Study 1. The influence of the political climate and local government culture is felt to have had a strong impact on interpretations of, and responses to, social inclusion policy within public libraries. Library staff are highly aware of the political environment in which they operate, and this can lead to a certain cynicism or apprehension when considering their contribution to social inclusion objectives.

Respondents described a certain ‘ticking boxes and jumping through hoops’ culture within local government, which made them suspicious of organizational motivation in meeting the social inclusion agenda. There is a sense that local authority chief executives create a superficial and cosmetic atmosphere for staff, particularly when correlating inclusion objectives to service standards and awards:

‘...we’ve got inspectors in the authority at the moment and I keep getting phone calls saying ‘what are you doing for over-50 African-Caribbeans, please ring the Chief with evidence and photographs by one o’clock today’, so the authority gets a sniffy couple of sentences then you have to produce the targeted stuff as well.’

This notion of the ‘quick-fix’ approach links to the perceptions of library staff of their service delivery on an operational level, for example with stock collections. It is felt that a ‘tick box’ approach is negatively affecting stock decisions, in what one participant described as ‘policy for policy’s sake’. This in turn is

encouraging negativity towards what is perceived to be overt political correctness:

‘...when I first went to [branch library] which was five and a half years ago, we had a very small collection of books in Hindi and Punjabi, and four and half years later, those books were still sitting in exactly the same place without a date stamp in them because nobody had taken any of them out... Somebody had said at some point “you need to have these books”, and so they appeared... I’d spent four years saying we need to take these books somewhere where they’ll issue, it’s just a horrific waste of material, and it took four years to get them shifted because nobody listens to us.’

‘You lose track of what you can say and what you can’t say... who we’re targeting this week... it becomes a political minefield and you forget that public libraries have been inclusive since their inception... they are by definition.’

The ‘tick box’ approach mentioned above has implications for the practical relevance and appropriateness of service decisions and staff attitudes towards the governance of their services, their own morale and levels of engagement. The general consensus seemed to be that the concept of community librarianship is becoming lost in a culture of political pressure and that social inclusion objectives are increasingly regarded as ‘add on’ responsibilities:

‘The trouble is though we have as I say a very mono-cultural profile but every now and again somebody somewhere will say ‘what are we doing for ethnic minorities?’, and the answer is ‘nothing’... so in the way that local government works we have to do something... but we haven’t got any ethnic minorities, so we might be prepared if any ever turn up but our training will be twenty years out of date!’

Cultural awareness and training

Stauss and Mang (1999) explored the concept of culture shocks in inter-cultural service encounters in a study of air travellers from three different nations.

‘Deviant behaviour’ from service personnel, in terms of the customers’ pre-conceived service expectations, was associated with the individual or the company’s lack of willingness to engage with them. In a study of empathy towards people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, Wang et al (2003) recommend the development of an occupational empathic multicultural awareness tool to inform the recruitment and professional development of education professionals. Mann (1997) criticizes any attempt to ‘control’ the real emotions of employees, in what is described as emotional labour, as this can have dysfunctional effects on both the individual and the organization.

Considering the above, we can suggest that in a service profession where inter-cultural encounters are likely to take place, staff with a genuine capacity for empathic concern may have the most effective outcome and facilitate the most positive perceptions and customer evaluation of their employing organizations. And with specific reference to ethnic diversity, Zhang (2006) recommends that

library staff should receive staff training in ‘foreign language and culture’, in order to deliver the best possible service to all potential users. Findings from Studies 1 and 2 and the literature would suggest that an appropriate training programme for public library staff would be related to ‘cultural awareness training’. As the name suggests, the objective of such training is to raise participants’ awareness and understanding of a culture other than their own, and to increase levels of empathy in engaging with people from such cultures.

Study 1 participants were asked to comment on the quality and effectiveness of existing training and communication methods within their own local authorities, with reference to raising awareness and developing skills within a social inclusion context. Some felt that training events or courses they had attended were outdated and no longer relevant to modern British society, or to the social challenges facing minority groups and service providers:

‘I don’t think that some of the attempts made at cultural awareness training are really appropriate... I went on a course about raising cultural awareness relating to Pakistani communities... the history of Pakistan, the culture and the food... None of it addressed the *British* issues of multiculturalism...’

‘In my authority the third generation... their greatest source of cultural influence is American hip-hop and gangster rap, which is much more relevant than having a meeting about onion bhajis...’

There are various issues associated with the use of localized (relevant to individual local authorities and communities) or more generic (often referred to as 'national') training methods and materials. One respondent involved in the delivery of a national project felt that the associated generic materials were inappropriate for local delivery, and that resources could have been allocated more effectively to ensure correct or more appropriate regional training provision. Another respondent felt that training was perhaps a little too local-based and reactive, and did not facilitate understanding of wider political objectives and policy frameworks:

‘The training tends to be very localized and on a need to know basis, which is good for the community outlook, but less beneficial when you ask about policy and how we fit in to the wider agenda.’

Other factors affecting the success and effectiveness of training provision - and arguably, therefore, the socially inclusive role of public libraries as a whole - include the lack of time and resources to provide comprehensive training and development opportunities for all staff. Senior Management interviewees believed that training provided by their individual authorities was appropriate on the whole, though several commented that provision could be improved with more investment in available time and money. It was implied, however, that senior managers view training as a supplementary activity designed to build on existing knowledge and skills:

‘...we have a rolling customer care programme... but it’s the same with any training, the people attending need the right aptitude for it or it won’t work... it’s more about the staff you have rather than the training you give them.’

‘Well, these are skills that people should have before they come to the job, or bring to the job! They shouldn’t be recruited otherwise. The training we provide is adequate as a bolster.’

Attitudes such as these were criticized by Study 1 workshop participants (invited key stakeholders from public library authorities and professional bodies) who felt that the senior managers were ‘deluded in thinking that existing communication methods are appropriate and effective’.

A culturally sensitive recruitment process?

Respondents to Study 1 noted that staff demographics are symptomatic of the recruitment processes employed by libraries and the type of applicants they receive. It was felt that central recruitment policies do not give individual libraries the freedom to recruit appropriate people:

‘... we’ve got targets for recruitment to match the local profile but we’re a long way from achieving it, particularly disability and ethnic minority... which has got a lot to do with the way our staff are recruited, which is out of our hands and done centrally, through Manpower, which

from our point of view is very unsuccessful in terms of social inclusion, and just generally, really.'

The issue of equal opportunities was raised as potentially sensitive and difficult when discussing the need to diversify staff profiles. There is a perceived tension between meeting expected criteria and fulfilling equal opportunities objectives, and recruiting staff with the required skills and competencies. Two respondents reported prior experience of this having occurred, with consequences for staff development and morale:

'You can't make people apply because they fit the criteria and they're ticking the boxes... The danger is you get staff who aren't up to the job because they're there because they tick a box...'

'I don't want to be seen to be criticizing people from certain communities, but I will criticize the employment policy that dictates you must employ x% from this cultural background, because I've seen people employed who couldn't even read.'

It was anticipated that the cultural profile of public library staff may change and develop over time, becoming increasingly diverse through successive generations of ethnic minority communities and different cultural groups:

'...we have a Bangladeshi centre, and we find that when we try to work with them it's very much a centre on its own, replicating the culture from

home to [city]... trying to get in and work with them is very hard... maybe in the future things might change with second and third generation communities.'

Respondents were 'hopeful' that this degree of integration and co-operation could be achieved, and considered it to be a probability due to the continually changing and developing demographic profile of the country as a whole. It was felt, however, that this will be more realistically and easily achieved on a short-term basis, in high density urban regions.

Are multicultural services for all?

So far, this exploration of the role of the public library service in supporting and promoting ethnic diversity has concentrated on staffing issues, whether in terms of general staff attitudes towards diversity, or specifically considering recruitment and training. However, the values of a truly inclusive organization should be reflected not only in terms of its personnel, but also in the resources it provides. The final part of this paper will therefore consider diversity in terms of public library materials, and the impact they may have on the entire community.

In 1996 Tyerman found that the provision of a multilingual service was considered to be essential by some ethnic minority groups, and certainly Tso's more recent (2007) study of library services to Chinese communities found that non-Chinese speaking library staff 'usually leave the task of understanding Chinese users' library service needs such as exploring popular fiction choice to [the] Chinese librarians' (28). However, in a study of Danish libraries Berger

(2002) concludes that it is mainly older members of minority ethnic communities who request materials in their mother tongue, and that younger users generally prefer to read in English.

Pettingill and Morgan (1996) tested the ethnic composition of a library's stock by comparing the library's holdings against titles listed as 'multicultural texts' in bibliographies. Whilst such a method is fairly limited in its approach, it nonetheless raises questions as to the nature and composition of minority ethnic stock collections, and whether or not they should match the profile of the local community.

As part of the interviews conducted for Study 2 library staff were asked to consider this issue, and found that staff from areas with a diverse ethnic profile agreed that library stock should reflect all local people:

'I think that library authorities need to put a lot more effort into ensuring that their stock and other services reflect the diverse make-up of their local community.'

'Using community profiles should determine the acquisition of stock.'

The implications of this for libraries with small ethnic minority populations, however, are less clear. One respondent from a lower ethnicity area expressed that their lack of demand and of ethnic minority communities meant that they had little ethnic minority stock, whereas other staff in similar areas suggested

that libraries in predominantly white areas still needed to have a large interest in ethnic minority provision, for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons:

‘Communities throughout the country could have an influx of foreign workers at any time, and that means they should be aware of the need to cater to all communities.’

‘I think having a good variety of multicultural stock in white areas like this benefits society.’

For most library staff, the reflection of national cultural diversity was seen in positive terms:

‘I would definitely keep doing them [promotions of ethnic minority materials]. I think it’s good to raise awareness of cultural diversity.’

‘I love that kind of thing, that’s exactly the kind of thing that makes the UK the UK, the fact that we have this diverse range of interest and whatever else, and it all feeds back into the cultural melee that is the country.’

One respondent in particular expressed his desire for all people, regardless of ethnic background, to benefit from materials about different cultures:

‘I still find the concept of “items of interest to ethnic minorities” awkward (leaving aside the issue of language for a moment). It's my belief that public libraries are compelled... to provide a depth and breadth of stock that caters for tastes across the board, and therefore to single out items of stock for a culture or community is unnecessary.’

The concept of multiculturalism, or pluralism, whereby ‘incoming’ cultures sit alongside existing cultures, was generally welcomed by Study 2 respondents as a notion of public library service provision, in particular because of its perceived capacity to increase mutual tolerance and understanding of cultures:

‘When you’re providing stock with an ethnic minority remit, you’ve got another opportunity there, which is you’ve got an educational value for those people who aren’t from ethnic minorities, or at least acclimatize people to the fact that there are other cultures out there and there are other ways of looking at the world. Integration in this country does generally work very well.’

Nevertheless, library staff also noted the potential benefits of a cultural assimilation approach, whereby library services could help minority ethnic communities to familiarize themselves with the culture they had entered:

‘We find that they’re happy to communicate in English, and they’re eager to improve their language skills. Because often this is their reason for coming to work here.’

‘I think if I had to change anything, improve anything, I would encourage greater use of mainstream materials and activities by ethnic minorities.’

Evidently, the assimilation approach is uni-directional, involving only (in this case) the immersion of minority ethnic communities in UK culture, whereas other respondents would support a more two-way transaction, an intercultural model whereby the majority community is also given the opportunity to learn about other cultures:

‘I think that what we should strive for is Britishness, and that involves everybody, I really hope that we should encourage open-mindedness. And that’s allowing you to engage with other cultures, and in doing so learn more about other cultures and in doing so learn more about yourself.’

In conclusion

In conclusion, findings of both Studies 1 and 2 have demonstrated that that public library staff in the UK generally recognize the importance of providing a service for minority ethnic communities in every library service, whether or not the local area is ethnically diverse.

Some respondents regarded staff cultural profiles as irrelevant, suggesting that all public library employees should possess sufficient cognitive empathy skills, and be therefore able to provide responsive and sensitive library services for a wide

range of users and social groups. For others, it was felt that traditionally disadvantaged groups will place a greater degree of trust and confidence in people they can recognize as familiar, can relate to and understand. Certainly, recruitment strategies are slow to change the obvious homogeneity of the current public library personnel, which is predominantly white, middle aged, and middle class, and although there is hope that this will happen in the longer term, there needs to be a revised approach for the immediate future of the service.

Furthermore, staff training was perceived by many to be inadequate in its current form, with a frequent emphasis on basic cultural awareness and not on the more complex nature of delivering a culturally appropriate service in an ethnically diverse society. It is therefore recommended that existing training provision be revised, in order to take into account this paradigm shift in minority ethnic services, whereby the focus should be not only on 'newly arrived' immigrant groups, but also on the changing needs of the more established communities.

The literature suggests that services for minority ethnic communities have tended to focus almost exclusively on foreign language provision. It is the perception of some library staff that this is still the main focus of this aspect of the library service. However, given the findings of Study 2 it could be concluded that the 'ethnic minority text' should serve a variety of purposes. There is undoubtedly a need for material in other languages, for both the settled and newer communities (such as the Eastern European migrant workers). Arguably, obtaining material in other languages is the most important challenge for most library services, simply

because having access to text in one's own language may help individuals to overcome social problems and to integrate more smoothly into this country.

Yet this should not be the only aspect of ethnic minority provision. Many members of today's minority ethnic communities were born in the UK. They may speak the languages of their mother countries, but their greater command of the English language as a result of having been through the UK education system means that foreign-language reading may no longer be a priority. The focus has shifted from the linguistic to the cultural, and their priority may now be to satisfy their curiosity to explore the culture of their mother-country, or to read books that reflect their status as minority ethnic citizens of the UK. Particularly in predominantly white communities, where the networks of minority communities may not be as firmly established as in larger, more diverse areas, second or third generation immigrants may feel that they to belong to the British culture, and wish to see their experiences of a multi-ethnic Britain reflected in books they read.

Additionally, there may be a benefit to all members of the community of being exposed to materials about other ethnic cultures, as part of the reflection of a culturally diverse society. This finding is very much in line with the theory of multiculturalism that society becomes richer as one's cultural horizons are expanded (Parekh, 2000; Sturges, 2004). This notion is particularly pertinent today, when the level of social fragmentation is particularly high in certain areas, and the debate is ongoing as to how to manage the issues of cultural diversity. Certainly, if we relate this idea to theories of social capital, it would seem clear

that such a wide exposure to cultural materials would help to establish those 'community networks' and the sense of 'community identity' that authors such as Percy-Smith (2000) have described.

As we have seen, the role of the public library service in building a more cohesive and culturally aware society is understood and acknowledged by many. Library staff are generally aware of the benefits that all members of the community can derive from an increased exposure to different cultures, and they supported the notion that libraries in predominantly white areas should nonetheless provide minority ethnic texts – in both minority languages and in English - in order to reflect the diversity within society as a whole. It was also demonstrated that some library staff are particularly enthusiastic to broaden this 'cultural exposure' of their users.

However, in a number of library services there is little evidence that such an inclusive strategy is pursued, especially in services where the promotion of minority ethnic texts is wholly concerned with engaging minority ethnic communities, and providing materials in languages other than English. Both of these roles are clearly important, but it is also felt to be essential to promote material from and about other cultures to all. A revised strategy to delivering inclusive services should therefore be developed, to include these multiple functions of the library service as of equal importance. This is by no means a simple task, but the very complexity of the different intercultural connections between individuals and cultures could arguably lead to what Durkheim

described in 1893 as the ‘organic solidarity’ within a successful society (in Durkheim, 1984).

In essence, these two studies have suggested that a strategic approach to increasing the cultural diversity in all aspects of the public library service – staff recruitment, training, the purchase and promotion of stock – would be of benefit not only to the minority ethnic communities, or to the white population, but may ultimately promote an intercultural model of practice which shares, promotes and celebrates diversity.

Acknowledgements

Briony Birdi and Kerry Wilson are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which generously funded ‘The right ‘man’ for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship’ (2006-8) [grant number 119140].

Thanks are also due to all public library staff and consultants who kindly gave their time to contribute to the research process for both studies.

Notes

¹ ‘The right *man* for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship’.

Project website available at

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/centres/cplis/research/rightman.html>

References

Audunson, R. (2005) 'The public library as a meeting-place in a multicultural and digital context: the necessity of low-intensive meeting-places', *Journal of Documentation*, 61(3), 429-441.

Barter, R. (1996) 'Multiculturalism and libraries: and still the battle rages', *New Library World* 97(4): 10-14.

BBC (2004) *Race body snubs 'un-British' work*. London: BBC News Online, 10 April, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3615379.stm>

BBC (2006) *UK 'must tackle ethnic tensions'*. London: BBC News Online, 24 August, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5280230.stm

BBC (2008) *White season. The programmes: part one - Rivers of Blood*. London: BBC Press Office, 14 February, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/02_february/14/white_prog1.shtml

Berger, A. (2002) 'Recent trends in library services for ethnic minorities – the Danish experience', *Library Management* 23(1-2): 79-87.

CIPFA (2006) *Public Library Statistics 2006*. London: Statistical Information Service, CIPFA [The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy], ref. 88.07.

Clough, E. and Quarmby, J. (1978) *A Public Library Service for Ethnic Minorities in Great Britain*. London: The Library Association.

Coleman, P. (1981) *Whose Problem? - The Public Library and the Disadvantaged*. London: Association of Assistant Librarians.

CRE (2007) *Integration, multiculturalism and the CRE*. London: Commission for Racial Equality, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): <http://www.cre.gov.uk/>

Crocker, S.K. (1975) 'Library services to Indian and Pakistani immigrants in Great Britain', in J.W. Martin (ed) *Library Services to the Disadvantaged*. London: Clive Bingley, pp.119-29.

Crow, G. and Maclean, C. (2000) 'Community', in Payne, G. (ed.) *Social divisions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Datta, S. and Simsova, S. (1989) *Cultural diversity & libraries: today and tomorrow*. London: PNL Press.

Durkheim, E. (1984) *The division of labour in society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan (original edition 1893).

Elbeshausen, H. and Skov, P. (2004) 'Public libraries in a multicultural space: a case study of integration processes in local communities'. *New Library World* 105(1198-1199): 131-141.

Elkin, J. (2003) 'Cultural and multicultural perspectives on reading', in Elkin et al. (2003) *Reading and reader development: the pleasure of reading*. London: Facet Publishing, pp. 116-142.

Employers' Organisation (2006) *Library Workforce Survey for 2005*. London: Employers' Organisation for Local Government.

Field, J. (2003) *Social capital*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gorman, G.E. and Clayton, P. (1997) *Qualitative research for the information professional: a practical handbook*. London: Library Association Publishing.

Goulding, A. (2004) 'Libraries and social capital: editorial', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 36(1), 3-5.

Hillenbrand, C. (2005) 'Public Libraries as Developers of Social Capital', *APLIS*, 18(1):4-12.

Japzon, A.C. & Jong, H. (2008) 'A neighborhood analysis of public library use in New York City', *The Library Quarterly*, 75(4), 446-63.

Kerslake, E. and Kinnell, M. (1998) 'Public libraries, public interest and the Information Society: theoretical issues in the social impact of public libraries', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 30(3): 159-167.

Lupton, R. and Power, A. (2002) 'Social exclusion and neighbourhoods', in Hills, J. et al. (eds.) *Understanding social exclusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Macpherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry*. London: The Stationary Office.

Mann, S. (1997) 'Emotional Labour in Organisations', *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 18(1): 4-12.

Mansoor, S. (2006) *An Investigation into The Provision of Ethnic Minority Library Services in Predominantly White Areas*. University of Sheffield: Department of Information Studies, Masters Dissertation.

MLA (2005) *Public libraries and community cohesion: developing indicators*. London: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, URL (consulted 13 May 2010):http://www.mla.gov.uk/~media/Files/pdf/2005/Public_Libraries_and_Community_Cohesion

Ocholla, D.N. (2002) 'Diversity in the Library and Information Workplace: a South African perspective', *Library Management* 23(1-2): 59-67.

Office for National Statistics (2010) *Current Estimates: Population Estimates by Ethnic Group Mid-2007 (experimental)*. London: Office for National Statistics, URL (consulted 13 May 2010):
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=14238>

Office for National Statistics (2003) *Population Size*. London: Office for National Statistics, URL (consulted 13 May 2010):
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=273>

Office for National Statistics (2010) *UK Statistics Authority*. London: Office for National Statistics, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

OED (2010) *Oxford English Dictionary*, URL (consulted 13 May 2010):
<http://www.oed.com/>

Page, D. (2000) *Communities in the Balance: the Reality of Social Exclusion on Housing Estates*. London: YPS, for The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Parekh, B. (2000) *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*. London: Macmillan.

Pateman, J. (2002) 'Reasons to be Wrathful', *Library Management* 23(1-2): 17-22.

Percy-Smith, J. (ed.) (2000) *Policy Responses to Social Exclusion: towards inclusion?* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Peters, R. (2000) *We Live in a Multi-Cultural Society. How Far is This Reflected in the Range of Adult Fiction Available in Public Libraries with Specific Reference to the African-Caribbean Community?* University of Sheffield: Department of Information Studies, Masters Dissertation

Pettingill, A. and Morgan, P. (1996) 'Building a retrospective multicultural collection: a practical approach', *Collection Building* 15(3): 10-16.

Putnam, R.D. (1993) 'The prosperous community: social capital and public life', *American Prospect*, 13: 35-42.

Roach, P. & Morrison, M. (1999) 'Pursuing the wind of change: Public library services in a multicultural Britain', *Asian Libraries* 8 (4): 112-7.

Roach, P. and Morrison, M. (1998) *Public Libraries, Ethnic Diversity and Citizenship*. University of Warwick: Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations and Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (British Library Research and Innovation Report no.76).

Stauss, B. and Mang, P. (1999) 'Culture shocks in intercultural service encounters', *Journal of Services Marketing* 13(4-5):329-346.

- Sturges, P. (2004) 'Understanding cultures and IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) core activity', *Journal of Documentation* 61(2): 296-305.
- Taylor, C. (1997) 'The politics of recognition', in Heble, A. et al. (eds.) *New contexts of Canadian criticism*. Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 98-131.
- Train, B. et al (2000) 'Embracing inclusion: the critical role of the library', *Library Management* 21(9): 483-90.
- Tso, H.M. (2007) *Social inclusion and public libraries: is the ability to empathise an essential attribute for community librarians to better serve their ethnic minority users?* University of Sheffield: Department of Information Studies, Masters Dissertation
- Tyerman, K. (1996) 'Getting things in focus: The use of focus groups in Brent Libraries', *Library Management* 17(2):36-39.
- Vårheim, A. (2007) 'Social capital and public libraries: the need for research', *Library and Information Science Research*, 29(3), 416-428.
- Vincent, J. (2007a) 'Social exclusion: looking forwards – again!', *Public Library Journal* 22(1): 19-21.

Vincent, J. (2007b) 'Social exclusion: changing, going, gone?', *Public Library Journal* 22(3): 15-19.

Wang, Y.W. et al. (2003) 'The scale of ethnocultural empathy: development, validation and reliability', *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 50(2): 221-234.

Wood, P. and Landry, C. (2008) *The intercultural city: planning for diversity advantage*. London: Earthscan.

Wright, M. (2002) *Social Inclusion Consultation Report*. Nottingham: Nottinghamshire County Council Public Library Service, URL (consulted 13 May 2010): http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/consultation/si_consultation_report.doc

Zhang, L. (2006) 'Communication in academic libraries: an East Asian perspective', *Reference Services Review* 34(1): 164-176.