

96.7 shades of white

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When I first started working in libraries back in 2010, I did not think much about the question of representation in the library. My first job was as a Saturday library assistant in a public library and we were a diverse group of staff. Most of the other library assistants on a Saturday were black and male, generally doing a second job to supplement their income or during studies. After leaving that job, I found out how rare it is to be in a workplace with BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) staff, in particular to find BAME staff further up the library hierarchy. As I started attending library conferences, I quickly came to realise how white our profession was.

In 2014, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Archives and Records Association (UK and Ireland) (ARA) commissioned a piece of research, looking to map the library, archives, records, information management, and knowledge management professions in the UK. In 2015, [CILIP released the executive summary of the study](#). One finding immediately jumped out at me:

“96.7% of the workforce identify as ‘white’ compared to 87.5% identifying as ‘white’ in UK Labour Force Survey statistics.”

I knew that the representation of ethnic minorities was low, but I had not quite grasped how badly it compared with the statistics for the UK labour force.

Our sector is whiter than average, and this is troubling. But this is not new information, we (our professional body at least) knew BAME was under-represented at least a decade ago. Back in 2009, the [London branch of CILIP commissioned a short study](#) to explore reasons for under-representation of black and minority ethnic staff in our sector.

On multiple reads through the study, I have become more critical of it. Certain phrases jump out at me in 2018 in a way they might not have done ten years ago:

“Anyone wishing to make a professional career in LIS obviously needs certain qualifications.”

(Uncritical acceptance that you must have a qualification to be professional librarian.)

“Perceived racism: fortunately, the problem of racism was mentioned by only a minority of interviewees, although several forms of it were described.”

(Perceived racism? Fortunately?)

Nevertheless, the existence of the report shows that CILIP knew there were issues. The report also mentions that in 2008, CILIP launched a positive action trainee scheme called Encompass with the aim of supporting 100 trainees over five years. I did not know about this until recently.

Sarah Arkle* noted in her dissertation in 2016 the difficulty she had in finding what had happened to the Encompass scheme. It died in 2012 due to the recession. The corpse is buried somewhere, and nobody really talks about it anymore. As far as I know, there was no follow up to find out how well it worked or what difference it made.

Flash forward to 2018. Ten years after the report the issues still persist.

In order to tackle the issues of the lack of representation, CILIP have quite recently started using black women in its promotional material. If you were to search for the hashtag #Trustedprofessional on Twitter, you may still find photos of librarians posing in front of a blown up photo of a black woman. You will perhaps note that most of the attendees are white.

I recently attended quite a big conference in April, again CILIP was there with the banner with a black woman, but all the speakers at the conference (the sessions that I attended) were white. I know of only one session with speakers from East Asia. I believe that was it. There were sessions that discussed subjects relevant to diversity, these were delivered by white speakers. In terms of attendees, there may have been a dozen of us who were BAME, and sad to say, that is probably considered good for a library conference.

A few weeks later, another library conference held a panel on increasing diversity in the profession, a panel that – according to tweets from those who attended – included four men and two women, all of whom were white. This conference apparently closed with a reference to Hamilton, the musical, asking:

“Who tells your story? And who’s missing from the room?”

Pause.

Please have a think about that.

Diversity has come to the forefront in the library profession, but who is telling the story? And who is missing from the room? Is it good enough just to plaster a photo of a black women in the background? Is that representation? Is talking about diversity without having the voice of BAME library staff good enough? Ten years on from talking about “a commitment to work towards establishing an LIS workforce that is representative of the diversity within UK society”, is it good enough to be saying “We are trying but . . .”?

Reading through the transcript of the interviews for Arkle’s dissertation, one interviewee mentioned that those in leadership roles may understand the need to be diverse “but don’t understand what it looks like, or how to achieve diversity”.

Galvanised by the inaction of those in positions of power, BAME library staff members have acted outside of the official organisational structure to make their voices heard. Jennifer Bayjoo set up [Diversities In Libraries of the North](#) (DILON) to give a platform for BAME library workers.

Perhaps BAME members are no longer willing to wait patiently and gratefully until some time in the future for the lack of diversity to be tackled. We are asking for those with power to do something now, not at the allotted time as indicated in a nicely formatted plan that span years. We are living in a time where we are constantly seeing the impact of racism in everyday life: Grenfell Tower, the ongoing Windrush scandal, increasing hostility to immigrants, a [predicted rise in hate crimes that will be triggered by Brexit](#).

Brexit itself is clearly fuelled by undertones of xenophobia. Who knows if the next recession will lead to diversity being a ‘nice to have’ on the agenda rather than something important. Look at what didn’t happen with Encompass.

But, BAME staff are only 3.3% of the workforce, and we are very unlikely to be in senior positions. We can't achieve anything, if our white colleagues don't care enough about the issue. If you do care and want to do something there are actions you can take:

- if you are white (and male) and have been invited to a panel, ask if the panel is diverse. If it is all white, think of who you can suggest to take your place so that it is not always the same voices speaking.
- if you see a conference where the speakers appear to be all white, raise this as an issue with the organiser. Tell them this is not acceptable.
- if you are organising a committee, is your committee all white? Are you actively seeking non-white voices and inviting them to the table? (A generic call out won't cut it.)
- if you are senior member in a library department, take a look at your working groups and committees. Do your BAME staff members get a chance to make their voice heard in these working groups? Do you even hire them or understand the barriers that you could be dismantling to encourage more applications?

These are the types of actions you should be thinking of taking. You can also read '[So you want to be an ally?](#)' by Natalia Gordan. In fact, read everything on the DILON blog, and while you are it, check out the [list of BAME librarians who are happy to speak at conferences](#). Read Natasha Chowdory's '[How to be a Brown Librarian in a White Librarian World](#)'.

This piece only scratches at the surface of the issues of lack of diversity, and I have spoken from the BAME perspective. I have highlighted some of the issues and research in this area, and I hope this will lead readers to engage with the issues.

To take a quote from Natalia's post:

“Stop asking what you can do – start researching what you can do. By asking people of colour how to be a better ally, then you are implying that someone else should do all the emotional labour for you.”

BAME library staff don't magically know everything, we've had to do our research as well. To this end I have started an online (and ongoing) [reading list](#) relevant to the issues of BAME in the library that might be a good starting point. Don't take my word for it, read for yourself.

* If you are interested in getting hold of Sarah Arkle's dissertation, 'Somewhat saddened, but not particularly surprised: Investigating CILIP's Workforce Mapping survey results, Librarians' responses to it, and perceptions of diversity in the Library and Information sector', please email her at sarah.arkle@gmail.com.

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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