



# How Effective are Academic Libraries' Attempts at Dismantling Racism?

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Although Black Lives Matter (BLM) is making more and more of us re-question our privilege and think about discrimination and Western power structures, this exploration needs to also extend to our workplaces. Librarians must recognise that rather than challenging systems of oppression, academic libraries have historically contributed to it by favouring white cisgender male authors at the expense of all others. Similarly, the membership figures of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) confirm there is under-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff in the library and information science sector.

## What were libraries doing before BLM?

Many British libraries now have equality and diversity initiatives (EDI) which aim to challenge the bias historically found in recruitment and selection processes, employee progression, performance management, and pay and promotion matters. However, there are criticisms that these measures only address the symptoms of the problem, rather than the underlying problem of organisational culture. This is because these measures rely on analysing numbers rather than the employee experience. Consequently, they miss evidence about who enters, leaves and thrives in the organisation. Neither do they look for patterns about who is more commonly assigned to certain types of projects, who is sent on training courses and who is more likely to have their leave requests granted.

Racism in professional settings is now rarely blatant or reflected in the form of overt hostility and racist actions. It has evolved into a more subtle and sophisticated form of micro-aggression behaviour. As Kandola argues, the perpetrators are not some wayward, thoughtless faction of an otherwise right-thinking population. They are you and me... we may have said something, assuming our interactions with others have been successful, whereas the person we have been engaging with has reached a very different conclusion. Moreover, racism is still present in the form of structural racism, with the notion that there is a structural component to racism that is more impactful than personal animus or hostility now well established. As a result, libraries need to look critically at how effective EDI initiatives really are in challenging the organisational culture of the library. An EDI measure has to be effective in preventing an environment that fosters racist processes, attitudes and behaviours through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping.

Many libraries may think that existing EDI measures already challenge behaviours based on stereotypes. For instance, implicit bias workshops ask employees to recognise their personal biases in their attitude and thoughts towards BAME communities. However, findings from Harvard Business Review reveal that while people are easily taught to respond correctly to a questionnaire about bias, they soon forget the right answers. According to them, the positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and a number of studies suggest that it can actually activate bias or spark a backlash.

Recruitment of more BAME people encourages contact and engagement with a more diverse range of employees. However, the recruitment of more BAME employees can simply amount to Tokenism, the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, for example recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups in order to give the appearance of gender or racial equality within a workforce. Many believe that neoliberal universities operate in a 'Benetton model of diversity' where 'diversity' is merely used as a marketing tool to commercially rebrand organisations, rather than serving as a real commitment to change.

Additionally, whilst organisations may be successful in attracting BAME employees through EDI recruitment and selection initiatives, many seem to find it hard to retain BAME employees. Academic libraries face this problem acutely. As mentioned earlier, the membership figures of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) confirm there is under-representation of BAME staff in the library and information sector. CILIP commissioned a report to explore the reasons for this under-representation. The report blamed misconceptions about the nature of library work amongst BAME communities as well as worries about isolation, prejudice and mild racism. In particular, there were reported misgivings about the relevance of library work due to the lack of books in ethnic languages and information for minority library users, a lack of representation amongst predominantly white, middle class library staff, and little with which BAME people could identify.

## So what can libraries do differently which would be more effective?

Initiatives which challenge habitual behaviours would be more impactful. Diversifying our library collections for instance, achieves this by addressing the cultural, systematic problems of White Privilege inherent in both the Library and Higher Education sectors. Admittedly, managers may experience initial problems and barriers when seeking to diversify their library collections. As Ahmed argues in her book 'On being Included. Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life', anti-racism work is always divisive and issues about imperialism in Higher Education and whether Britain holds a conscious and/or unconscious 'imperial blind spot' inevitably create controversy and antagonisms.

Proof of this can be seen by the fact that, even amongst librarians, there is discord about the right terminology to use for creating a more inclusive library collection. Some librarians view the use of the word 'Decolonising' as problematic. Instead, they deem terms such as 'Liberating' or 'Diversifying' as more appropriate. I share the latter viewpoint. As has been historically the case in academic institutions, 'Decolonising' is a

term which has traditionally been used and redefined by those from an empowered and privileged position in a Western Societal structure. Since academic library managers are statistically more likely to be white, they should think carefully about how they define and project this perspective on other colleagues.

Moreover, successful leaders guide actions through their use of language. Words are critical to how organisational culture is seen and understood. This is especially the case for sensitive issues like race, where simple mis-wording and misunderstanding can mean the difference between a white staff member acting as a 'White Saviour' rather than as a 'White Ally'. The term 'White Saviour' refers to when white people are applauded for trying to 'fix' the problems of marginalised communities without realising that their own presence or attitude reflects outmoded imperialist patterns of power. As Ian Clark argues, "actions guided by a White Liberal lens only perpetuate the structures that managers are claiming they wish to dismantle".

This is not to dissuade white managers from becoming involved in racial matters for their library. As the evidence shows, their own White Privilege means that even if they are met by resistance, it will not be to the same extent as people of colour. Managers must simply remember that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over matters that concern them. For instance, they should involve BAME employees in the process and consult them about the titles and resources to be included in their library collections. Managers need to realise that this project will not feel easy or comfortable, but is likely to be challenging and uncomfortable from both a work and personal perspective. Diversifying is both naturally and necessarily unsettling. Yet, managers must navigate these difficult feelings in order to undertake these projects and make sure they are effective.

Libraries should also stop relying so heavily on standardised EDI measures such as implicit bias training. From personal experience, Bias Tests, do not offer in-depth theoretical knowledge as to why different races have natural bias. Bias Tests do not explain that we all suffer from the effects and consequences of 'Othering' and/or 'White Privilege, instead race is seen as something that only applies to non-white people. As long as white people are not racially seen or named, they function as the human norm: other people have a race, 'we' are just people (Please note that the 'we' denotes white people; an assumption that will often be made when society talks about 'people' anyway). This shows that the common EDI Bias Tests do not impart wisdom about how to view our biases or understand the nature of them. Rather than being 'trained' about how to look at 'the under-privileged', which current EDI measures ask us to do, books can ask us to look at our own privilege and consider the privileged and/or underprivileged lens from which we define and understand our workplace experiences.

It would surely then be much easier to listen to our BAME colleagues and accept, rather than just understand, why their reality may not match ours. A positive work culture of mutual understanding and respect would clearly be more attractive to prospective BAME employees, which would have the effect of more BAME people applying to work in our libraries and more importantly staying and thriving in them. Creating an inclusive collection would additionally improve BAME experience by generating more in-depth awareness of BAME issues for their white colleagues. Allocating staff off-duty time to allow them to browse new collections is not only beneficial for all colleagues' welfare but enables more education and knowledge about this subject.

While this piece has only looked at academic libraries, an inclusive library collection would favour all types of libraries. It should be noted that the content of inclusive literature is especially important. As one public library worker noted: "I had a lot of stories with black characters but upon closer analysis I discovered that more than half of those were stories with civil rights or the civil war as the backdrop". Librarians must also work to avoid stereotypical depictions of BAME communities. Again, this can only be done with education and understanding around the structural privilege of both the self and others.

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